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# Towards Integration: An Autoethnography on the Development of Identity

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TOWARDS INTEGRATION  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of Columbia College Chicago  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Master of Arts  
in  
Dance/Movement Therapy & Counseling

Dance/Movement Therapy and Counseling Department

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an autoethnography that explores my own experience of identity development. The intention of this research was to try and find an answer as to why I have not yet been able to develop a cohesive sense of self, in which I am able to accept and embody all of my seemingly disparate parts. I have thus far in my life felt scattered, and unable to accept both the cultures into which I was born, as well as the cultures to which I am organically drawn. Through introspection, reflective writing, and interviewing family members, I have been able to begin to compile a type of roadmap of my life that helps me understand where I come from, how my core values have developed, what truly motivates me in life, and what patterns of psychological thought have been established that hold me back from accessing my full potential. I have realized that I am longing for and moving towards integration. To that end, I used a movement exploration, as well as a short piece of dance choreography, to embody the entire thesis process and help me discover where I am currently at on the path towards self acceptance.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **The Problem**

It is customary in our Western, American culture to identify people by certain categories such as nationality, ethnicity, race, class, gender, religion, etc. Yet these labels leave little to no room for an individual to express who they are from the inside out. Most of these categories are based on exterior assessment and inherited associations. A problem may arise, as it has for me, when one does not identify with any, or very few, of these imposed categories. If an individual does not identify with the classifications she inherits, then how is she defined? Does she have the liberty to define herself as she sees fit, and align herself with the cultures to which she is innately drawn? Or is there an obligatory association with the cultures and traditions into which she was born and raised?

It may seem to some that the answers to these questions are simple. One opinion may be that yes, of course, every person has their individual right within our Western, American culture to claim who they want to be. Others may say no absolutely not, you are what you are born into and taught to be. The question becomes further complicated based on how one defines culture. Does culture only belong to those commonly identified categories of race, class, and gender? Or, can culture be any group of people with a common focus and shared values? For example, we often refer to national cultures, such as Colombian culture, or Indian culture, or American culture. Is it just as valid to discuss the culture of African dance in the United States, or the culture of African dance in Chicago, or the culture of African dance on the south side of Chicago? Furthermore, can an individual have her own culture, or can culture only exist when there is more than one person who is a part of it? What is clear is that how we choose to define culture makes a significant difference in how we perceive one another.

In addition, there are certain categories of identification that are easier to pick out than others. Race is a cultural category that is difficult to overlook. People cannot hide the color of their skin and are continually assessed by this defining factor. Most do not have a choice. On the other hand, a cultural association with a particular religious practice or profession is not as externally obvious. One can choose to share that information with others or not. Again, the question arises can an individual's identity be defined from the inside out, or is it solely externally assessed?

The question of identity and how it is determined and defined has become a problem for me personally. By traditional standards I am a white, American, upper-middle class woman, from a half Jewish and half Catholic family. Yet, I do not identify with most of those categories. I am a woman, a classification I feel aligned with. I am a white woman, as that is the color of my skin. I am fully aware that the color of my skin affords me privileges everyday as I navigate through the world. However, it is precisely this external assessment of me, as a white, American woman that I struggle with. This identification feels quite limiting and does not represent any of the complexities of who I am. It does not leave any room for my innate pull to cultures from Africa and the African diaspora. It does not account for my love of travel or that I feel most at home when dancing through the streets in Brazil surrounded by sweaty, pulsing, dark bodies moving vigorously to the beat of loud drums. So, why am I identified as a white, American, woman rather than as an African dancer, a Spanish and Portuguese speaker, and a traveler? Who decides how we each compose our identities? Do people decide for themselves or does there have to be some kind of cultural, external consensus?

I have realized as of late that my inability to form a cohesive identity has to do with the fact that I feel like I have many parts that are authentically me, yet these parts do not seem to fit

together with ease. What's more, there are various parts that I have difficulty accepting, and various cultures to which I feel intensely drawn but cannot claim as my own. I have trouble accepting my whiteness and my privilege. I do not identify with being American, nor have I ever understood, or felt connected to, either my Jewish or Catholic heritage. On the other hand, African dance is a culture to which I am organically drawn and a practice which resonates with me on a profound, spiritual level. Engaging in this form of dance ignites my passion. It makes my heart sing, my soul come alive, and my spirit feel free. Yet, it is a tradition that belongs to another group of people, people of African descent. I feel as though I cannot claim it as a part of me because I was not born into it. Simultaneously, I feel as though a part of me is missing when I cannot claim it as my own.

This internal dissonance is a problem for me. I have not been able thus far in my life to form a cohesive sense of self. Who I am is not readily accepted by the outside world, nor is it easy for me to accept myself. The result is that I feel scattered and unable to bring together my seemingly disparate parts. Furthermore, I always experience some internal discomfort with who I am, often criticize myself for who I am, and have trouble loving myself for all that I am.

### **An Investigation**

As one can imagine, my inability to embrace all of who I am affects various aspects of my life. This includes my work as a clinician in the field of mental health. When working on a thesis topic in my graduate thesis seminar two and a half years ago, I realized the importance for me of addressing this internal conflict. I realized that if I cannot complete the all important task of loving myself and embracing all of who I am, I would be ill equipped to help others do the same. I believe that it is of vital importance as a dance/movement therapist and counselor to be continuously working on better understanding myself. I must know my own strengths and



limitations in order to be as present and authentic as possible with those whom I serve.

Furthermore, who I am and what I bring to the table with my clients is as fundamental to the process of therapy as who each of my clients are. I know this, and thus know that my own personal work towards self acceptance is just as important in the therapeutic relationship as the work I do to support others. Therefore, for this project I began the journey of introspective inquiry into who I am, how I became who I am, why I have such a hard time accepting who I am, and what I can do to move towards integration.

This thesis is my story of the development of a self. I offer it with humility, hoping that others see the vulnerability in writing one's truth, rather than a narcissistic paper focused on me. My wish is that perhaps my story will mean something to someone and spark a desire for further contemplation about that person's self in relation to the rest of the world. As an autoethnography, I offer my story as it relates to the ever-evolving global culture of mankind to which we all belong. I hope it provides some insight into what I believe is a somewhat common experience of the struggle of identity development and acceptance of self. I began two and a half years ago, and will begin here with my original research question that sparked many more questions and various avenues of investigation. What I wanted to know, and to a certain extent still want to know, is: how do I navigate an internal world of multi-culturalism, and integrate disparate parts of myself, in order to work with diversity and cross-cultural issues in the world through dance/movement therapy?

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The bulk of this literature review will focus on autoethnography (see Appendix A) as a qualitative research method that is highly disputed among the ranks of qualitative researchers. When I began this project, I had a difficult time understanding this approach to research no matter how much I read about its construction. Through the writing of this literature review, I quickly came to realize that this method is amorphous and difficult to articulate. However, it is also open to creativity and subjective experience, which I believe are important contributions to the genre of qualitative research. This literature review will begin with an exploration of the concepts of identity and self as they relate to the development of an individual. As an autoethnography, this thesis project is focused on myself, the dynamics of the interaction between myself and various cultures, and my inability to form a cohesive identity. Thus, I thought it important to first, explicate a basic understanding of the concepts of identity and self, second, to discuss various conceptions of culture, and lastly, to dive into the world of autoethnography.

### **Identity, a Sense of Self**

Identity and self are vast and challenging subjects to broach as they are the very things of which the field of psychology is made. Each is a concept that people grapple with in an attempt to understand who they are and live satisfying lives. Below, I will briefly discuss a few theoretical approaches to the concept of identity, within which is included the self. I have chosen to address the theories of identity proposed by a few of the harbingers of the field of psychology: (a) Sigmund Freud and his theoretical approach known as psychoanalysis, (b) Erik Erikson and

his developmental theory which outlined stages achieved throughout the lifespan, and (c) Carl Jung and his theoretical approach to the development of the psyche termed analytic psychology.

Sometimes the terms identity and self can be used interchangeably as they are closely related (Graafsma, 1994). Thus, it is important to clarify when using each term what one means by it. According to Graafsma (1994), within psychoanalytic theory “identity refers to an aspect of mental organization and functioning” (p. 23), while “self generally refers to one’s own person, body and mind together” (p. 23). Rangell (1994), also writing from a psychoanalytical perspective, asserted that identity is a person’s conceptualization of the self. He stated that “the self is actual, identity is a mental state” (Rangell, 1994, p. 28). Whether connected to and contributing to one another, or viewed as separate entities, identity and self are concepts that both point to the fundamental essence of who we each are as human beings.

**Sigmund Freud.** First explored here, is the approach to understanding identity as developed by Sigmund Freud at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> (Graafsma, 1994). Freud is credited as the father and creator of many of the core concepts of Western psychology (Ivey, D’Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2007). Thus, his perspective seemed important to include in a discussion of the human need to identify a sense of self.

Freud’s theory of psychology, termed psychoanalysis, put forth the idea that “identity is a summation of self-representations” (Rangell, 1994, p. 29), and exists within the ego. The *id*, *superego*, and *ego* were terms coined by Freud that referred to the major psychic components of each individual. Briefly, the *id* can be seen as a person’s basic drives and needs, the *superego* as both conscious and unconscious values and beliefs constructed within a social context, and the *ego* as the mediator between the *id* and *superego*, which works to understand the interplay of the

various parts and navigate through the world (Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2007).

Graafsma, writing about the psychoanalytic perspective, continued on to explain that:

Identity in general refers to an awareness or a perception of persistent sameness between two or more things or states. A sense of identity refers to the subjective experience of such sameness, both within one's own body and mind, and within an average expectable, recognizing and sharing environment where one feels in place". (1994, p. 23)

In this statement, the author has pointed to two distinguishable components of identity: the internal experience of an individual about who she is, and the external sense of who she is which is an agreed upon identification approved by a group or culture outside of herself.

Within psychoanalysis, a sense of identity does not need to correspond directly to reality (Graafsma, 1994). A person's identity partially flows from the unconscious mind and is constructed as her conceptual understanding of her own characteristic behavior (Rangell, 1994). It is theorized that a sense of identity develops early on in life, approximately between eight and 36 months. A child may develop such an orientation towards herself in order to assist her in finding stability in a constantly changing environment (Graafsma, 1994). Yet, the search for an identity and an understanding of self continues throughout the lifespan. Freud considered the search for identity not only to be continuous, but to be a primary motivating factor of the mind's activity (Graafsma, 1994, p. 21).

**Erik Erikson.** Secondly, many scholars in the field of psychology have looked to the work of Erik Erikson to understand identity and human development (Marcia, 1994). Like Freud, Erikson noted that identity exists both within the self and outside the self in relation to others within a social context. Erikson's notion of a sense of identity included something that was constant in a person's life, providing continuity through past, present, and future. Erikson's

unique contribution to the theory of human development was this sense of continuity within one's identity throughout the lifespan, as well as the developmental markers he branded.

Erikson, writing between the years of 1950-1963, articulated a theory which included eight psychosocial developmental stages that occur over the course of a lifespan (Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2007; Marcia, 1994). Each stage included physical, social, and psychological milestones. The fifth stage Erikson termed *identity vs. role confusion* (Ivey et al., 2007, p. 372), which occurs during adolescence. It was Erikson's claim that the primary crisis of identity occurred during this phase of life, and the majority of identity formation was solidified at that time. Despite his view that identity was established during adolescence, Erikson did concede that identity reformulations can occur throughout the life cycle (Marcia, 1994).

I tend to disagree with Erikson's view that an individual's identity is fixed around the time of adolescence and continues as a constant throughout one's life. I agree that there are factors that contribute to one's identity from all the different phases of life, and that there is some continuity present. Yet, I do not believe there is a specific moment when one's identity is established. From my own life experience, understanding myself is a continual process of discovery, a process that may or may not be resolved in my lifetime.

**Carl Jung.** Lastly, a student and colleague of Freud, Carl Jung, expanded upon and strayed from psychoanalysis to develop his own approach called *analytic psychology* (Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2007). I thought it essential to include Jung's approach to human development here because of his overall perspective of what constitutes the self (the self includes forces from both the personal and collective conscious and unconscious), his concept of *individuation* (that each person is striving to find wholeness within herself), and the fact that his theory resonates with me personally.

Jung's perspective varied from Freud in a few key ways: (a) Jung focused on people's positive developmental potentials as opposed to their innate sexual and aggressive drives, (b) he presented a flexible and dynamic developmental process of every individual, as opposed to a series of expected developmental changes, and (c) he theorized about the significant impact on psychological development of both the personal unconscious and the *collective unconscious* (Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2007). He viewed the personal unconscious as the repository of memories of past experience, thoughts, feelings or understanding that was no longer held in active awareness (Hopcke, 1999). The collective unconscious was conceptualized as a timeless experience shared between all human beings, and which houses the eternity of human experience. Jung explained the collective unconscious below:

In so far as no man is born totally new, but continually repeats the stage of development last reached by the species, he contains unconsciously, as an *a priori* datum, the entire psychic structure developed both upwards and downwards by his ancestors in the course of the ages". (Jung, 1959, pp. 279-280)

Furthermore, Jung saw the collective unconscious as "comprised of a complex, universal, and primordial set of psychic images that are common to all of humanity" (as cited in Ivey et al., 2007, p. 165). Those psychic images Jung termed *archetypes*. It is important to understand Jung's conceptualization of the collective unconscious, the archetypes, and the process of individuation, in order to be able to conceive of how he viewed identity and the development of the individual.

The collective unconscious was considered by Jung to be "the ultimate psychic source of power, wholeness, and inner transformation" (Hopcke, 1999, p. 14). It was the domain of the archetypes. The archetypes were seen as symbols and figures, devoid of ego-consciousness, that

continually appear in people's dreams, and have appeared and re-appeared over thousands of years in myths and religions throughout the world (Hopcke, 1999; Jung, 1959). Jung asserted that it is the goal of the human psyche, and part of our intrinsic nature, to become whole (O'Connor, 1985). Some have claimed that this act of becoming whole can be equated to transcendence or enlightenment. This state of consciousness has been attained by few (such as Jesus or Buddha), but striven for by all (O'Connor, 1985). According to Jung, one is able to become whole through the process of individuation. Individuation is the process of integrating the unconscious, both personal and collective, into one's consciousness (Hopcke, 1999). This integration of the opposing forces of the conscious and unconscious mind is no small task, and has no recipe (Jung, 1959). Therefore, it is a lifelong journey in which a person strives to become "a psychological 'in-dividual', that is, a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole' (Jung, 1959, p. 275).

Jung believed that therapy could help a person work on integrating the unconscious, including the archetypal energies, into consciousness. It seems to me that the lifelong endeavor of individuation, searching for wholeness of self, is similar, if not equivalent, to a search for a cohesive identity. Jung may have further elaborated on the concept of identity through a discussion of two of his archetypal constructs: the *ego* and the *Self*.

The ego was sometimes referred to by Jung as the self, with a lower case *s* (Hopcke, 1999). He saw the ego as a group of psychic representations of one's self, which included distinctive feelings, both conscious and unconscious aspects, as well as parts from the personal and collective unconscious. Jung indicated that "the ego is how one sees oneself, along with the conscious and unconscious feelings that accompany that view" (Hopcke, 1999, p. 79). This ego resides in a much larger psychic universe and is relatively small. Jung acknowledged the

relatively fleeting nature of the self and human beings in a larger existence, and thus saw the importance of the ego in relation to the Self, with a capital S.

Jung's archetype of the Self is the representation of wholeness within the collective unconscious (Hopcke, 1999). The Self is that which we are all striving to achieve during our processes of individuation. It is "the archetype of a supraordinate, organizing, principle of psychic selfhood" (Hopcke, 1999, p. 96). Additionally, Jung related this idea of Self to an experience of god. I believe he was pointing to a sense of the divine within each individual that is present and accessible if one allows that part of the collective unconscious to breach the limits of the conscious self.

It seems to me that in Jung's perspective, the formulation of a cohesive identity has to do with integration: integration of the unconscious with the conscious, integration of the collective unconscious with the personal unconscious, and integration of the ego with the Self. This is the path we, human beings, are all on despite the fact that our pathways may look different. Furthermore, this is the approach to understanding self, and our composite view of who we are in the world (identity), that makes the most sense to me.

## **Culture**

It seems necessary in this paper about identity development, and how self and culture interact to create an individual, to briefly address the concept of culture. The concept of culture was born within the field of anthropology (Chang, 2008). Over time, there have been many definitions proposed that attempt to define culture, and scholars continue to develop and fine-tune the definitions. In this paper, I will focus on the concepts of culture addressed by Chang, as she focused on those definitions that include "people as interactive agents" (2008, p. 15). Rather than seeing culture as an independent entity, her understanding of culture recognized the impact



of the individual on culture, as well as the impact of culture on the individual. Chang noted that culture is an interplay between an individual and a group of people, each one influencing, mirroring, and straying from the other.

Chang (2008) argued that culture is “inherently group-oriented” (p. 16). She stated that the idea of an individual’s own personal culture does not exist because culture results from human interactions. Chang advocated that an individual’s culture is still “formed, shared, retained, altered, and sometimes shed” (2008, p. 17) through interpersonal interaction. I would agree with Chang that people do not exist in a vacuum, and therefore are consistently influenced by culture. In addition, individuals continually have an impact on the cultures with which they come into contact. However, I would assert that an individual can have just as much influence on her own worldview, or culture, as the cultures with which she comes into contact. I would not give greater weight to what forms one’s identity: an inside-out internal process, or an outside-in external process. Therefore, I think the individual, as well as culture, are both critical in the development of one’s ontology.

De Munck (2000) beautifully articulated the inextricable connection between culture and the individual when he wrote:

Obviously, one does not exist as a psyche—a self—outside of culture; nor does culture exist independent of its bearers. While we depend on both our cultural and natural environment for survival, the two are fundamentally different kinds of environments. Culture would cease to exist without the individuals who make it up, but the natural environment would continue without us. Culture requires our presence as individuals. With this symbiosis, self and culture together make each other up and, in that process, make meaning. (pp. 1-2)

De Munck pointed to the vital reliance culture has on the individual, as well as the impact culture has on the individual. It is by putting these two pieces together and making explicit their dynamics, that people find meaning in life's experiences.

An important question in understanding various approaches to defining culture is where does culture reside? Is it outside of ourselves or inside of ourselves (Chang, 2008)?

**Culture from the outside in.** Chronologically, the first anthropological approach to understanding culture was a perspective of looking in from the outside (Chang, 2008). From this perspective, cultures are an observable whole to which all members belong, and by which all members can be defined. The ethnographic study of cultures other than one's own, was originally conducted with a view from the outside in, maintaining the researcher as separate and objective. Profiles of such cultures were assembled with a focus on "observable differences in custom, social structure, language, religion, art, and other material and nonmaterial characteristics" (Chang, 2008, p. 18). Clifford Geertz (1973), a cultural anthropologist, theorized that culture is established through the process of interpersonal, interactive communication and meaning-making. For Geertz, this meant that making-meaning was public and a group process, and therefore culture was a public concept constructed outside of the self.

**Culture from the inside out.** The second anthropological perspective on the locus of culture was that it existed in people's minds (Chang, 2008). People were the bearers of culture, as well as the "active agents who create, transmit, transform, and sometimes discard certain cultural traits" (Chang, 2008, p. 20). This was an inside out approach, which gave the individual more power to influence culture and acknowledged the continuous exchange between self and others in cultures. Scholars who supported the inside out perspective recognized that culture cannot be solely responsible for determining the personalities of its members. Therefore, the

individual must be of import. There seemed to be debate about the extent to which culture was “a passive set of ideas located inside the meaning-makers” (Chang, 2008, p. 20) versus an exchange between the meaning-makers which produced agreed upon standards and beliefs. The most poignant part of this perspective was that individuals were active agents in the definition of and creation of culture.

**Culture, continually defined.** The debate about defining culture and how to understand its parts continues. De Munck, a cognitive anthropologist, wrote:

The part culture plays in shaping our understandings and theories of the self and meaning cannot be ignored. Few people would question the statement that cultures are different. But the very simplicity of this truism conceals such mysteries that it implodes on closer examination....Where does one culture begin and end? Where is it? What differences are we referring to? (2000, p. 2)

De Munck’s questions inspire further questions related to my thesis project, such as: how much of the self is defined by culture? How many cultures can one individual belong to? Are some cultural identities of more import than others? For instance, does it matter more in my identification of self that I am Caucasian or that I am a dancer? Who determines what is important or relevant? The culture or the individual? What is more important in identity development the cultural classifications of an individual from socially agreed upon categories such as race, class, and gender? Or the personal values and traits that a person establishes from interacting with various cultures, considering what is of import for herself, and making a decision about who she wants to be?

Culture is thus a complex concept, understood differently by various scholars and imparted through divergent definitions. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the concept of

culture that includes individuals as active agents and highlights the mutually influential relationship between the individual and a given culture.

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is one approach to better understanding the self, the makeup of an individual, and how that individual interacts with the world. Many authors have attempted a definition of autoethnography. Spry (2001) wrote that “autoethnography can be defined as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts (p. 710). Chang (2008) clearly stated that her approach to autoethnography is a combination of “cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details” (p. 46). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, in a recent summary of autoethnography, wrote that “autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (2011, p. 273). I believe Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010) stated it succinctly by describing autoethnography as “a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and context to gain understanding of the connectivity between self and others” (p. 1).

All of these definitions have common components: self, others, self-reflection, cultural context, and research. How they differ is in the amount of emphasis placed on the different parts of autoethnography. To better understand the parts, I would like to break down the word. The end of the word, *graphy*, refers to the research process or study. The middle of the word, *ethno*, means culture, and the first part of the word, *auto*, refers to one’s self (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; Wall, 2006). Therefore, autoethnography is the study of self within culture.

Where scholars seem to diverge from one another is how important each piece of these three axes (auto, ethno, and graphy) are to an autoethnography. There are those who have tended to emphasize the importance of methodological rigor when it comes to the cultural relevance of a given study (Chang, 2008; Wall, 2006), and others who have embraced and argued for the validity of a focus on personal experience (Ellis, 2002, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010; Muncey, 2005; Spry, 2001; Thomas, 2010).

Bochner and Ellis (2000) discussed the continuum of autoethnographies with varying levels of emphasis placed on each of the components: auto (self), ethno (culture), and graphy (research). On one end of the continuum is autobiographic writing which focuses more on the individual's story. Autobiographies emphasize the study (graphy) of one's self (auto), and place less emphasis on the individual's relationship to culture (ethno). On the opposite end of the continuum is ethnographic writing. Ethnographic writing emphasizes the study (graphy) of a culture (ethno), and places less emphasis on the self (auto) in relationship to culture. However, autoethnography embraces all perspectives along the continuum and includes all three components. This method allows the author to decide how much of each of the three components (self, culture, and research) need to be emphasized in her study.

This thesis has evolved to be on the autobiographic end of the continuum of autoethnographies due to my use of personal experience and self-reflection as primary data. However, as it is an autoethnography and not an autobiography as I have consciously included my continual reflection on how my personal process of identity development is relevant to others and the society in which I live.

**History.** Autoethnography has its roots in ethnography, a research method commonly used in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology (Spry, 2001). Ethnography is the study of culture. It means “writing about or describing people and culture, using firsthand observation and participation in a setting or situation. The term refers both to the process of doing a study and to the written product” (Ellis, 2004, p. 26). Historically, ethnographic researchers have conducted studies about cultures other than their own. This afforded the researcher a position of looking from the outside into an unknown world. While there may be certain benefits in such an approach where the researcher is removed from the subject matter, such as emotional distance and objectivity, there are also drawbacks. Such drawbacks include a certain privilege given to the researcher over the subjects by the mere nature of the relationship (Spry, 2001). Furthermore, some scholars now acknowledge that the “traditional reliance on neutrality and objectivity” in science is not attainable (Wall, 2006, p. 9). No matter how diligent the researcher, people bring to their work their own ontology: values, beliefs, biases, and prejudices. Thus, we must recognize that “no individual speaks apart from a societal framework of co-constructed meaning” (Wall, 2006, p. 9).

Autoethnography falls within the larger framework of qualitative research. In the 1960’s a battle line was drawn between the two scientific approaches of quantitative and qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The quantitative approach became favored in science as it is evidence based. The belief held by its proponents is that it is more dependable and repeatable than qualitative research, and bias free. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) no research method is bias free. Qualitative approaches are merely more descriptive and sometimes subjective than quantitative methods. Denzin and Lincoln offered a description of qualitative research as follows:

Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. (2005, p. 10)

Here, the authors pointed to various characteristics of qualitative research that are not quantifiable and provide value: understanding personal and interpersonal experience, understanding subjective experience, making meaning of experience, and recognizing and analyzing the relationship between researchers and research subjects.

Within qualitative research methods there are a large variety of techniques and approaches. Some included are participant observation, interviews, life histories, focus groups, grounded theory, case studies, ethnography, autoethnography, performance studies, narrative inquiry, arts-based inquiry, action research, and feminist research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Ellis, 2004). The aforementioned qualitative research methods are not at all an exhaustive list, but merely examples of the types of qualitative approaches.

According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), in the 1980's there was a crisis of confidence in the academic halls of qualitative researchers. Scholars began to realize that research, like the people conducting it, was fallible. Bias in research was inevitable. Subsequently, the postmodernist movement ushered qualitative approaches away from so-called, hard science and towards subjective experience. A new understanding arose that recognized that "stories were complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that taught morals and ethics, introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling, and helped make sense of themselves and

others” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 274). As a result, there was a multidisciplinary move towards such practices as autoethnography which allowed researchers to focus on

...ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us. (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 274)

Spry (2001) seemed to be in agreement with the statement above when she claimed that autoethnography was born as a radical reaction to the inherent hierarchical dynamic of ethnographical research. Why should a researcher be required to exclude her own thoughts, opinions, and perspectives in her research? Within the practice of autoethnography, there is a belief that there is value in both what the researcher observes in others, and what she observes in herself. Autoethnography is the search for a deeper understanding of others through a deeper understanding of self (Chang, 2008).

Some authors place autoethnography in the genre of personal narratives. The fact that self is included in the research process, and may even be the focal point of the research, qualifies this method as a personal narrative. However, autoethnography differs from other forms of personal narrative such as autobiographies, memoirs, journals, personal essays, and letters, by “connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Pioneers in the practice of self-reflective research, Ellis and Bochner, as well as Goodall, agreed that the value of autoethnography is based on the idea that “self-reflexive critique upon one’s positionality as researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 711).



Ellis and Bochner (2000) further noted that “the narrative text refuses the impulse to abstract and explain, stressing the journey over the destination, and thus eclipses the scientific illusion of control and mastery” (p. 744). When I began this thesis, I struggled extensively with the idea that my own experiences would be of any use or relevance to others. The heuristic orientation of my project made me feel narcissistic. After two and a half years of working on it, learning about myself and about this methodology, I realize there may be value for others in my own struggles and thoughts. Those who read this thesis may resonate with parts of my personal process which I could never foresee.

**Types of autoethnography.** Autoethnography has been adopted by and applied across academic and professional disciplines. Such fields of study have produced autoethnographies in recent years: anthropology (Waterston, 2005), sociology (Thomas, 2010; Wall, 2006, 2008), communication (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004), education (Chang, 2008; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010), performance studies (Spry, 2001), nursing (Muncey, 2005), psychology (Grant, 2010; Schneider, 2005), and social work (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). Autoethnographies have taken many forms, and continue to be generated in new mediums. Such forms as “short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose” (Ellis, 2004, p. 38) have been produced. Others, such as Spry (2001), have taken on embodied performance as a method of expression. Furthermore, new formats such as collaborative autoethnography (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010) continue to emerge. The options for an autoethnographic project seem limitless. That is part of the beauty and the challenge of this method. As acknowledged by Ellis (2004), “autoethnography does not proceed linearly” (p. 119). Because the material is personal and subjective, trying to pin down a tangible, step by step process for completion can be

frustrating and seemingly impossible. Given the nature of this introspective work, the beginning can become the end, the middle the beginning, and the beginning can transform into something new. It is an open-ended method which I have found difficult to articulate. As Wall (2006) noted, what is written about autoethnography is ““highly abstract and lacking specificity” (p. 6).

Yet, various writers have attempted to lay out the different types of autoethnography and how one can go about doing them. According to Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010) there are those researchers, such as Ellis and Denzin, that fall on one end of the spectrum as promoters of evocative autoethnography, and others who fall on the opposite end of the spectrum, such as Chang and Anderson, as analytic autoethnographers. Below I will discuss the different types of autoethnographies as articulated by two authors from different camps. First, Ellis (2004) who falls into the evocative autoethnography camp. Subsequently, Chang (2008) who falls into the analytic autoethnography camp.

Ellis (2004) identified six different types of autoethnography. They were (a) personal narrative, (b) indigenous or native ethnography, (c) reflexive or narrative ethnography, (d) complete member researchers, (e) confessional ethnography or ethnographic memoir, and (f) contingent autoethnography (pp. 45-51). The first approach, personal narrative, has a primary purpose of understanding “a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context” (Ellis, 2004, p. 45). “The goal is to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference, to include sensory and emotional experience, and to write from an ethic of care and concern” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). I believe this is the type of autoethnographic work encapsulated in this thesis. The second subheading is a type of autoethnography referred to as indigenous or native ethnography. Such autoethnographies are “written by researchers who share a history of colonialism or economic subordination, including subjugation by ethnographers who have made

them subjects of their work” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). It allows the subjugated to give voice to their own experiences. The third approach, reflexive or narrative ethnography, focuses “on a culture or subculture and authors use their life story in that culture to look more deeply at self-other interactions. This approach offers insight into how the researcher changed as a result of observing others” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). The fourth is what is referred to as complete member researchers. “Complete member researchers are fully committed to and immersed in the group they study....During the research process, the ‘convert’ researcher identifies with the group and ‘becomes the phenomenon’ being studied” (Ellis, 2004, p. 49). Confessional ethnography or ethnographic memoir is the fifth subheading. In this autoethnographic approach “the ethnographer, who is the focus of the story, tells a personal tale of what went on in the backstage of doing a research project” (Ellis, 2004, p. 50). Such projects are “rooted historically in personal diaries and journals” (Ellis, 2004, p. 50). The sixth and final approach identified by Ellis was called contingent autoethnography. This is “where an author writes about others, most likely not planning to study anything about the self. Then in the process of research, the researcher discovers his or her connection to the material and to the world studied. Perhaps the researcher then rewrites her own life story as a result” (Ellis, 2004, p. 51).

In an overview of autoethnography, written in 2011, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner included a few more forms of autoethnography. In addition to those mentioned above, they discussed (a) layered accounts, (b) interactive interviews, (c) community autoethnographies, and (d) co-constructed narratives (pp. 278-279). “Layered accounts often focus on the author’s experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature. This form emphasizes the procedural nature of research” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278). “Interactive interviews are collaborative endeavors between researchers and participants, research activities in which researchers and participants –

one and the same – probe together about issues that transpire, in conversation, about particular topics”...the emphasis is on “what can be learned from interaction within the interview setting as well as on the stories each person brings to the encounter” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 279). Community autoethnographies use the experience of a group of researchers “to illustrate how a community manifests particular social/cultural issues” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 279). Lastly, co-constructed narratives are written first independently by each member of a project (partners, friends, family members), and then shared with one another in order to dialogue about reactions, feelings, insights, and thoughts. These projects “illustrate the meanings of relational experiences”...and how people cope with “ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 279).

Chang (2008), in contrast to Ellis, laid out for her readers a step by step approach to autoethnography. I believe her methodical approach was partially an attempt to communicate to interested researchers what to do to engage in an autoethnography, and partially a desire to validate this method by making it tangible and measurable. I found some of her recommendations useful, while also feeling the organic, creative nature of this research process somewhat stunted by this author’s style.

The collection of personal memory data is at the beginning of Chang’s (2008) process to complete an autoethnography. She recommended chronicling the past through timelines, writing exercises (such as exploring significant life events, or routine life events), and reflecting on things that were important to an individual such as proverbs, rituals and celebrations, mentors, and cultural artifacts. She encouraged introspection through such exercises as free drawing and creating family diagrams. The next types of data she suggested gathering were self-observational and self-reflective. Both of these forms of data would be systematically documented over a period of time, thus reflecting information about one’s self in the present. Chang defined self-

observation data as that which reflects “what is happening at the time of research” (2008, p. 89), including behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. While self-reflection data was that which divulges one’s personal and present perspectives. She indicated that self-reflective data resulted from “introspection, self-analysis, and self-evaluation of who you are and what you are” (Chang, 2008, p. 95). External data was the last type of data she identified. This could include information from interviews of others, the collection of artifacts important to an individual, and new learnings from the completion of a literature review.

As is evident, there are numerous approaches to autoethnography, and a variety of tools one can employ to help such a project progress. What I took away from both the readings on autoethnography, as well as my own experience of undertaking such a project, was that this form of research has a very organic, personal, and potentially illogical way of coming into creation. It is almost like a birthing process. Furthermore, it requires openness, flexibility, the ability to listen to one’s self, and diligence on the part of the researcher. Time is also needed for the essential parts of the story needing to be told to come forth, and thus patience.

**Criticisms of autoethnography.** Throughout the literature, the primary criticism I have noted is one of validity. Those coming from the discipline of quantitative research, as well as more conservative autoethnographers, have advocated that some forms of autoethnography do not adhere closely enough to “traditional notions of objectivity, reason, and truth” (Wall, 2008, p. 47). However, it has been argued time and again that “classic norms of objectivity in the social sciences have been eroded” (Wall, 2008, p. 42) by an acknowledgment that science cannot be completely objective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Because researchers are people, and people are inevitably biased, research can never be wholly objective. All writing is written from a particular point of view, at a particular moment in time, and for a particular purpose (Ellis & Bochner,

2000). Even the renowned psychiatrist, and former Nazi camp prisoner, Viktor Frankl recognized in his musings between the years of 1946-1984 that:

Each person's unique position relative to their disposition and situation means that he or she will perceive and represent internal and external phenomena only in particular ways. This of course means that no human being has access to universal truth". (Esping, 2010, pp. 207-208)

Objectivity in research seems to connote a lack of emotional involvement (Wall, 2008). Yet again, in my opinion, when it comes to research involving human subjects, human beings are never able to completely remove themselves, their thoughts, feelings, or beliefs from a given study. It is impossible. Even in research involving a survey or questionnaire with limited human interaction, personal reaction can be elicited. The way questions on a survey are written, the content of the questions, the way the survey is administered, all provide opportunity for personal, emotional reaction (Ellis, 2004). Nevertheless, "expert knowledge is socially sanctioned in a way that commonsense knowledge is usually not, and in various practices is accorded higher or lower status dependent on how it has been produced and who is saying it" (Muncey, 2005, p. 5).

Ethical concern in autoethnography is another point of criticism. Often, even if an autoethnography is about an individual, those important in the life of that individual may be mentioned. Revealing any details about the private lives of others is cause for concern. Thus, autoethnographers must consider if it is necessary to present the characters in a given story anonymously, or ask permission to use the personal information of those involved (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; Wall, 2008).

Given the fact that many autoethnographies rely heavily on the use of memory data, autoethnographers must recognize the fallibility of human memory (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner,

2011). Researches must be cognizant that recalling feelings or experiences is rife with the possibility for error. Furthermore, authors must acknowledge that the recalling of an experience may be very different in one individual's voice versus another's. However, it is precisely the unique perspective of an individual that is of interest in an autoethnography. Autoethnographers are inspired by what is different in one person's experience from another's. In addition, there is an underlying belief that we, as an academic community and as fellow human beings, can learn from each other by sharing our personal experiences and perspectives.

Autoethnography can be criticized for being too artistic to be scientific, and too scientific to be art (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The argument from the literary side, mostly those who write autobiographies, dismissed autoethnography as "being insufficiently aesthetic and literary and not artful enough" (Ellis et al., 2011, p.283). Criticisms from the scientific community include that autoethnography is "insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). Assertions have been made that autoethnographers do not gather enough valid data from outside of themselves. Some scholars disagree with the use of personal data, arguing that personal data is biased and thus nonscientific. Finally, some criticize autoethnographers for being narcissistic and lacking scholarly orientation (Ellis et al., 2011). As mentioned above, I struggled with the idea that my autoethnographic thesis was overly self-indulgent. Up until the writing of this literature review, I saw my self-reflective writing as irrelevant and uninteresting. Now I believe in the power of the personal story, and wish more people would take on such introspective investigations. I think such work could aid our communities in breaking down barriers between people by getting to know more of the intimate workings of one another.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) stated that the criticisms of autoethnography erroneously put science and art at odds with each other. These authors argued that contrarily autoethnography seeks to support the blurring of divisive lines between the disciplines, and asserts that “research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). It is a methodology that embraces differences and creativity, rather than requiring researchers to adhere to traditional, canonical forms of doing research. According to Ellis et al. (2011), the most important questions to autoethnographers are: “who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going” (p. 284)?

**What is good autoethnography?** Some authors even see autoethnography as a form of resistance against scientific traditions. As Spry (2001) stated, “autoethnographic writing resists Grand Theorizing and the façade of objective research that decontextualizes subjects and searches for singular truth” (p. 710). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) would likely agree with the above statement, as they wrote that “for the most part, those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective” (p. 275). Contrary to the linear tradition of scientific writing, Ellis and Bochner identified that writing autoethnography is part of an “existential struggle for honesty and expansion in an unknown world” (2000, p. 749). If life is chaotic, messy, and diverse, how can research be dry, linear, and indisputable?

So, what makes a good autoethnography? According to Spry (2001), transformation is a primary goal within autoethnography. There is potential for transformation of the researcher, the researched, and the reader or audience. Furthermore, she wrote that for an autoethnography to be effective it must be well written, emotionally engaging, critically self-reflexive, contextualized,



and theoretically sound (Spry, 2001). She saw autoethnography as a process of integration, both for the researcher and those the work reached.

Ellis (2004) wrote that “good autoethnographic writing is truthful, vulnerable, evocative, and therapeutic” (p. 135). She emphasized the importance of the writing as therapeutic. She recognized that good autoethnographic writing can be cathartic for the writer. However, and more importantly, potent autoethnographic writing can resonate with others, and provide the opportunity for introspection and interpersonal dialogue. Thus, autoethnographic writing really has two foci: (a) the author and her personal experience, and (b) the reader and the thoughts and conversations prompted by a good autoethnographic story. Autoethnographers actually have quite lofty goals that they hope to achieve through the telling of their own stories. They seek to “improve and better understand our relationships, reduce prejudice, encourage personal responsibility and agency, raise consciousness and promote cultural change, and give people a voice that, before writing, they may not have felt they had” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 280). With this statement, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) eloquently sum up my desires as an autoethnographer: to offer my story with humility, hoping that there is a chance that it will resonate with someone and engender empathy and openness (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010).

There are various, real challenges in writing good autoethnography. It may seem like a particularly simple and easy form of doing research as it is self-focused. However, that has been far from my own experience. As the subject being researched, I found the collection of personal data, the synthesis of the data, and the analysis of my own history and experiences extremely difficult to process. I am not alone in this experience as various authors have noted the difficulty of being truly vulnerable in good autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner,

2000; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; Spry, 2001; Thomas, 2010; Wall, 2006, 2008). Sharing the personal with the public is no small task. In doing such work the author risks great criticism, and must know that she has no control over how her readers will interpret her work (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Outside criticism can feel like more than just a critique of your work, it can seem like a critique of the author's own life. This can be difficult to digest. Furthermore, an author has to be willing to confront things about herself that are less than flattering. She must be capable of honest self-reflection and able to tolerate fear, doubt, and emotional pain (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). All of the above are substantial demands from a deceptively simple research method.

### **Hypotheses and Resulting Questions**

The obvious question here is why does my story about my struggle with identity development need to be told? Why is it important to me and to others? Those are difficult questions to answer. Part of the reason it needs to be told is for my own therapeutic process of integration. Through this project, I am attempting to gain better understanding of myself. I am trying to recognize my limitations as well as my strengths. My desire is to find some kind of new learning, and maybe even resolution with my challenges of accepting and embracing myself and all of my various, seemingly disparate parts. Yet I do this introspective work because I want to be a good therapist. I want to do the necessary internal work that will help me find peace within myself, so that I can be both an example for and an empathic supporter of my clients. I think all people struggle with the concept of who we are and the task of finding acceptance and love for that person. What better way can I become more open to working with clients around such issues as identity and diversity, than to do my own personal work first?

Other questions that arise for me include: what can I discover about myself? Can I find any resolution? Can my experiences possibly resonate with others? How do I truly make my personal experiences relevant to a wider cultural context? Will this self-reflective project aid me in becoming a better therapist?

## Chapter Three: Methods

### Methodology

This thesis is an autoethnography. Autoethnography can be defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273).

Autoethnography can be done in a variety of ways, and with varying levels of focus on the personal (auto), cultural (ethno), and research process (graphy) (Ellis et al., 2011; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; Wall, 2006). In an effort to avoid repetition, I will not go into depth in this chapter about the specifics of this qualitative approach to research as it was covered at length in the literature review. However, I will elaborate below on why I chose this method and how I went about completing this study.

This project stems from an experience I had while doing my internship as an *expressive therapist* (see Appendix A) at Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital two and a half years ago. One day, while conversing with my academic supervisor, I had a realization that I was not bringing all of myself to my work. Namely, that I was not bringing to my movement-focused, therapeutic groups any of my knowledge of, or passion for, African dance. Rather, I was following a formula that I had constructed in my mind of what it meant to do dance/movement therapy. The problem was that I was not really connecting to my work, feeling my passion in my work, or allowing myself to be true to myself when working. Thus, the question arose: why do I hold back parts of myself in my work as a dance/movement therapist?

What I realized was that I was unwilling to bring certain parts of myself to my work, such as my connection to African dance and to various cultures within the African diaspora. What’s more, I was unable to personally embrace these parts of myself, as well as many others. I

recognized that I had never been able to integrate into a cohesive whole what seemed to be my many disparate parts, and I constantly held certain parts at bay. This resulted in me feeling as though I had no cohesive identity structure. My sense of self was intangible and I felt as though it had been torn into many pieces. Thus, I came to a consensus with my faculty advisers that it would benefit me greatly, both as an individual as well as a professional in the field of mental health, to conduct a study looking at myself, how I had come to have such a fractured sense of identity, and how to begin the process of reintegration.

Autoethnography as a method seemed to fit this study as it promotes investigating personal experience, as well as how the personal interacts with culture. There is an understanding among autoethnographers that the personal is cultural and the cultural personal, because the individual and culture are mutually influential and inextricably linked (Chang, 2008). One does not exist without affecting the other.

In this study, I was interested in exploring why I felt disconnected to the cultures from which I come, and more connected to the cultures to which I am drawn. Yet ironically, I was unable to embrace either. The cultures I inherited but felt disconnected from included: being white, American, upper-middle class, privileged, and of both Jewish and Catholic descent. The cultures to which I was drawn but unable to embody included: African dance and dance from the African diaspora, particularly in Latin America, Afro-based music, language, spirituality, and folklore. Unconsciously, I had rejected the cultures into which I had been born and I could not accept the cultures to which I was drawn. My difficulty accepting my innate draw to Afro-centered cultures was because they were not mine to be had, I was not born into them. Thus, I found myself in a conundrum of which I had not even been aware. This internal conflict was negatively affecting my life and my work.

## **Participants**

As a result, I embarked on this autoethnographic study to try and better understand myself. As mentioned above, I am a Caucasian, American female, and I am 34 years old. One may correctly assume that I do not like presenting myself solely with such identifying factors as race, nationality, gender, and age, as I believe that those identifiers offer a very limited perspective of who I am. Nonetheless, I understand that those are parts of myself that I cannot deny, and they are the aspects of me that people first experience when we come into contact. It is not easy when walking through the world to disregard my race or gender, and I do not expect anyone to do so. Nonetheless, I think it is important for people to continue to develop an awareness that we are each much more than meets the eye, and cultivate openness towards one another.

The only other participants in this study were my parents. I interviewed my parents during this thesis process to gain a better understanding of how they felt their values and beliefs had come from their Catholic and Jewish cultural upbringings. My father was raised in a Catholic family, while my mother was brought up in a Jewish family. I wanted to know what they identified to be the roots of their values, how their values had changed over time, and how their values had influenced my own. Within this thesis there is some personal information about my parents. I requested that they each read and approve of the material that mentioned them and told pieces of their stories.

## **Procedure**

This autoethnographic project evolved in a completely nonlinear manner. Below, I will attempt to outline the steps I took to complete it. However, I ask the reader to be aware that it did

not develop in an easy to articulate, step by step form. Rather, the experience was more like riding an unpredictable wave that often felt totally out of my control.

I began this project with a thesis question: how do I navigate an internal world of multiculturalism, and integrate disparate parts of myself, in order to work with diversity and cross-cultural issues in the world through dance/movement therapy? From this question, a list of related questions sprung forth. My list of initial questions, as well as an extensive list of questions that arose throughout the process of data generation, are detailed in the results chapter. Therefore, I will not list them here. My first step at generating data was to reflect on one question at a time and write a response. The writing style was open and mostly took the form of narrative prose, with the occasional stream of consciousness ranting. I documented both my thoughts and feelings about a given question or topic.

This self-reflective writing was my primary source of data for this project. Over the period of approximately two years during which I was generating data, I spoke with my thesis adviser about once a week. Each time we spoke, I felt as if we came up with new questions, new thoughts about what could be relevant and important to my study, and potential new directions for further reflection and research. At times, this process was somewhat maddening as it was difficult for me to hold onto the core of my project and what it was that I was really trying to accomplish. I continually had to come back to why it was that I was doing this study, and what it precisely was that I was trying to find out. Oftentimes, I was unable to answer those questions, and needed support in re-articulating my primary objective.

I was only able to respond to some of the many questions that arose during this thesis process. Here, I will note those questions that I wrote about and explain how some may have segued into subsequent questions or topics that I explored.

The first two questions I attempted to answer at the beginning of my process, in July of 2010, were: what attracted me to African dance? And what does African dance teach me about myself? My reflections on these questions led to a conversation with my adviser about values, and we jointly decided an examination of what I value, and where those values may have come from, would assist me in better understanding my own worldview.

Thus, we devised a plan to make explicit my values and beliefs as follows. First, I would write a list of reasons why I value African dance. Next, I would write a list of values I have that may align with either my Jewish or my Catholic heritage. After I made my own lists, I would go on to interview and discuss with my parents what values they held that they saw as coming from their respective religious and cultural upbringings. In addition, I wanted to know what core values they held that did not come from a Jewish or Catholic foundation. Finally, after gathering all of that information, I would compare and contrast my lists. The intention was to see what values overlapped on my lists as compared to my parents, and to see what stood out as different. Also, I was trying to understand what experiences or values I found in the culture of African dance that I did not find elsewhere. In summary, I wanted to know how each of these different cultures (African dance, Jewish heritage, Catholic heritage, and my immediate family) contributed to my worldview.

To my surprise, I found that some of my own core values did align with my parents, and could be attributed to their religious and cultural upbringings. This was enlightening for me as I never identified with being Jewish or Catholic, yet unknowingly held some values that came from those lineages. Some of my parents' other core values, that I would not associate with a religious or cultural influence from their youth, I had also inherited. What I noticed when I compared the values passed down from my family to those I found to be important in my



experience of African dance was that the two complimented each other. To a certain extent, they filled in the gaps left by the other. For example, from my parents I inherited such values as respect for others, a sense of embracing those that are different or live on the fringe of society, and a desire to give back. From African dance I received such important experiences as a sense of freedom, a connection to others as well as to ancient history, and harmony. My synthesis of these reflections on values is detailed in the results chapter.

In order to look a little deeper, I reviewed my historical accounting of my family and where my belief system may have come from. Along with my adviser, I was looking for themes. The themes that arose were making meaning and seeking out transcendent experience. Thus, my adviser asked me to write about how making meaning motivates me, and how experiencing transcendence motivates me. These reflections helped me see where these desires I have (to make meaning and experience transcendence) have come up in my life over and over again. For me, making meaning is connected to intellectual striving, to a desire to learn more and understand more, to a philosophical orientation towards existentialism, and to my interest in psychology. My draw to experiences of transcendence I think is both learned as well as innate. I spent many years in spiritual communities, and both of my parents are spiritual seekers. I learned this search for deeper understanding of myself and the world from my parents. However, there is a part of me that connects organically to spirit. Unlike my parents, I found my most potent connection to spirit, and to myself, through African dance. It, African dance, is my direct link to a universal source or an experience of the divine.

After exploring my family's and my personal ontology through values and life themes, my attention shifted to the possible application of Carl Jung's theories on psychological development to my crisis of identity. Jung articulated a concept he called individuation, which

refers to the drive of all human beings to become whole and find fullness in life (Hopcke, 1999). His idea that identity formation is a lifelong pursuit, and that there are both conscious and unconscious factors contributing to each of our constitutions, resonated with me. Furthermore, it spurred my interest in what life experiences, other than those of my youth, had thus far influenced my sense of self.

In order to get a wider perspective on what experiences had been influential in my life, I began compiling a list of truly critical, life-changing events. Among those on my list, most experiences could fall into one of three categories: extreme pain, great joy, or an excitement and curiosity about something new and unknown. All of these experiences contained a common thread of deep, emotional impact. Thus, I began reflecting on the importance of emotional knowledge versus intellectual knowledge. My adviser recommended reading about the philosophies of *Négritude* and *vitalism*, to see how I may align with their principles.

The essence of what I received from my research on *Négritude* was that Afro-centric cultures value intuitive knowledge, or what could also be referred to as emotional knowledge, equally to, if not more so than, intellectual knowledge (Diagne, 2010). When I read about the intuitive base from which many Afro-centered cultures direct themselves, my draw to such cultures made much more sense. I have always deeply valued intuition as a guiding force in my life, and often feel more removed from myself when I discount my intuition and rely too heavily on reason. I wondered if my draw to African, African-American, and Afro-Latin cultures did not have something to do with an unconscious attempt to balance myself out by listening to my intuition. Given the focus in American culture on intellectual knowledge and development, I thought perhaps my time in African dance class was a reprieve from brain-based activity and a

direct line to my emotional self. Dance class has always provided me with a time and a place to be free to connect with my intuitive self, my spiritual self, and my body.

Integrated into the philosophy of Négritude is the concept of vitalism. Vitalism is the idea that all living things are connected by a unifying and essential force (Diagne, 2010). Vitalism ascertains that spirit is pervasive and that there is energy coursing through and around all sentient beings at all times. This energy is a living, creative force that drives evolution (Lawlor & Moulard, 2011). This ontological perspective aligns both with my experience of African dance as well as my experience in life. I perceive the divine in the energy I share with other people and with the natural world.

I felt as if I had found some insight into my connection to Afro-based cultures through a mutual value placed on intuition and emotional knowledge. Yet, I felt as if I had little to no answers regarding why I have not been able to embrace neither the cultures in which I was born, nor those to which I have been drawn throughout my life. At this time, my adviser encouraged me to start writing my results chapter even though I felt frustrated and stuck. She recommended writing precisely about how I felt that all the pieces I had explored still felt scattered and were not coming together. To write about how I had struggled with this project for well over a year and nothing made more sense than when I began. To write about how I had not yet written enough about myself, reflected enough on the many questions I had formulated, and how I had not uncovered enough or learned enough about myself to make it seem worthwhile.

When reflecting on how I had not yet done enough or learned enough to satisfy myself and feel as though I was making progress, I realized something essential. What came to light in this moment was a primary psychological pattern for me: that everything I do, and who I am, is not good enough. I realized that this pattern of thought had permeated who I am and all aspects

of my life. It was precisely this pattern, that nothing I do is good enough, that was holding me back in my thesis process. It seemed critical at this juncture to further investigate this pattern of thought and write reflectively on why nothing is ever good enough for me. I needed to explore where this notion came from and determine how it may actually serve me in my life.

Recognizing this self-deprecating pattern of thought and behavior was a breakthrough for me. It revealed the dark side of my perfectionistic tendencies, and provided insight into why I approach things the way I do. This self-disparaging pattern of thought was not news to me, however the ubiquitous nature of it was a revelation. I had not realized how pervasive and damaging it had become. It was from this realization that I began to write my results chapter, exploring how I had arrived at this place where this thought pattern that nothing I do is ever good enough was directing my life.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data happened alongside the generation of data in this project. As my adviser and I developed questions, as I wrote responses, and as we discussed my writing, we were constantly paying attention to the evolution of the data. I continually asked myself what the significance was of a given insight, how it might help guide my study, and what further work should be done to better understand myself and my lack of a cohesive identity. As this project developed, insight and analysis unfolded naturally through self-reflection and conversation. Furthermore, the analysis of each piece of writing guided the subsequent step I took to complete the project.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **Goal of this thesis**

In this thesis my intention was to examine my inability to form a cohesive identity structure for myself. The identifying factors I have inherited of being a white, upper-middle class, American woman with a mixed Jewish and Catholic heritage have been difficult for me to accept or identify with. In addition, the cultures I am drawn to, such as African, Afro-Latin, and African American do not feel like my own to embrace. Therefore, I am left floundering in a void where there is little to grasp onto and where I often feel invisible. During this process of writing my thesis, I hoped to be able to reconcile some of these seemingly disparate parts of myself in order to begin to formulate an identity. I wanted to engage in this self exploration in order to feel more whole within myself, and by extension be able to offer more of my talents to the world as a clinician. I felt that without being able to accept myself, I could not effectively help others to do the same. I hoped that my personal investigation would help me better understand how to support others struggling with self-acceptance, self-worth, diversity and cross-cultural issues.

### **Guiding questions in data generation**

Entering into this thesis project my primary research question was: how do I navigate an internal world of multi-culturalism, and integrate disparate parts of myself, in order to work with diversity and cross-cultural issues in the world through dance/movement therapy? Many other relevant questions developed throughout the process. The list of questions I began with included:

- What are the cultures from which I come?
- What are the cultures to which I am attracted?
- What are the differences and similarities between those two groups?

- Why am I a white, upper-middle class, American woman who is drawn to African and Afro-diasporic dance, culture, music, and people?
- Why do I push aside those parts of myself that compose my given identity?
- Why do I feel at home in cultures that are not my own?
- How do I integrate within myself my disparate interests in Afro-centered dance and music, travel, languages, religion and spirituality, folklore, and being of service?
- How do I bring my various passions to my work as a dance/movement therapist, in order to be more authentically myself in body and spirit?
- How do I own my various parts?
- How will this investigation influence my work as a dance/movement therapist?
- How can I use this experience of self inquiry to help others navigate issues related to either an internal or external experience of diversity or multi-culturalism?

Questions that developed throughout the last two years of writing reflectively and creating data include:

- How do I use my identity to do multi-cultural dance/movement therapy work?
- How can we define identity: its components, its formation, and its expression?
- What are the major influences in my life that move me towards my work?
- What are my core values? Where do they come from? My parents? Jewish/Catholic heritage?
- If all pieces fit, what would I look like?
- All my interests have to do with healing. How have they prepared me to be a healer?
- Am I an emotional refugee?
- Why do I value African dance?

- What attracted me to African dance?
- What does African dance teach me about myself?
- Through African dance I am extending into what universal commonality?
- How does movement help me connect to, or define my identity?
- How is movement, particularly African dance, my bridge or pathway to mystical/spiritual experience?
- How does dance help perpetuate cultural identity?
- What is the relevance and importance of the philosophical ideas of Négritude and the key quality of intuition?
- How can the theory of vitalism (from philosopher Henri Bergson) contribute to my work?
- How do the ideas of the mystical, Jewish tradition of the Kabbalah relate to traditional African values?
- How do ideas from shamanism and mysticism contribute to my worldview?
- Why did I accept that intuition and spirit were important?
- Why did I accept African mysticism as opposed to other cultural forms?
- How do Jung's theories of individuation, active imagination, and shadow material influence my understanding of my personal process of development?
- What are life changing events I have experienced? How have they impacted me?
- How did my early experiences in the Ashram impact me?
- What was the first thing that moved me towards African American culture?
- How do I reconcile my privilege?
- Where does my identification with the underdog come from?
- How do pleasure, transcendence, and meaning motivate me?

- How does rhythmic activity impact me? How does group movement activity impact me?  
How does symbolism impact me? How does relationship impact me?
- Is the experience I have when dancing African dance a basis for healing? When having this experience, how does a person become alienated from it, or obstructed from this state of mind? What gets in the way of having this experience in everyday life?
- Why can I not accept my inherited cultures?
- Why can I not accept my adopted cultures?
- Why or how do I feel scattered?
- Why can I not make a whole out of all of this?

Obviously, there are too many questions here to be answered in one thesis project. I believe I reflected upon and/or wrote about approximately one third of the questions above. The results of this effort are below.

### **Results of data generation and collection**

The process of generating data, continually clarifying what I set out to do in this thesis project, and actually writing the thesis has been tremendously frustrating for me. Over the past two years, I have reflected upon and written about myself over and over again. I have written about my heritage, I have written about my values, I have written about why African dance is important to me. I have constructed, reflected upon, and then vetted long lists of questions that seem relevant to further understanding myself. Yet, only some new learning has occurred for me. I expected to gain new insight into why I cannot form a complete identity and be comfortable in my own skin. However, I do not feel enlightened by many of my findings.

Because of my frustration, and seeming lack of advancement with the project, a question arose in conversation with my thesis adviser about one of my own psychological patterns: that



nothing is ever good enough for me. My own actions, behaviors, thoughts, processes, creations, etc., are never good enough for me. I am always left unsatisfied, even if it appears as if I have succeeded. Thus, my thesis adviser and I began to wonder if this pattern of thinking was of particular significance for me, and perhaps holding back the completion of my thesis.

After reflecting on this psychological pattern, I may have identified part of where it came from, and how it serves me in my life. I write here about my own history, and my family's history, not with the intention to blame others for my psychological hang-ups, but with a desire to better understand myself.

### **Self-judgment**

My mother is, and both of her parents before her were, quite judgmental people. My grandparents were judgmental of those around them and of their children. I think my mother was always trying to live up to some unattainable standard her parents had set for her. My grandparents always seemed motivated in their lives by fear. They spent much of their time worrying about things out of their control or about the unknown. I believe my mother inherited from her parents this constant state of worry. Also, she seems to have developed and maintained a belief that she could never be good enough to meet the standards they had set for her. Subsequently, I may have inherited and internalized some of those beliefs as well.

When I was a child, my mother, at times, seemed dissatisfied with who I was. My demeanor drove her a bit crazy. I was a quiet and shy child. I liked to do things slowly and diligently. She seemed to always want me to be more like her: outspoken, unedited, fast-paced, proactive, and both emotionally expressive and volatile. When we had conflict she would get loud and pushy. I, on the other hand, would retreat into myself. The louder she got the more I would retreat, and the more I would retreat the louder she became. We would often find

ourselves stuck in an unending spiral of emotional distress. I may have deduced from these recurring interactions that who I was was not right, correct, or sufficient to meet her expectations.

I remember as a child being critiqued by my grandparents when my family visited them. I was a vegetarian for the first 26 years of my life, and they thought that was weird. My grandfather always asked me when was I going to eat meat, when was I going to be normal, and what was wrong with me? I think I may have felt somewhat rejected by them as well because they refused to call me by my name, Kanchana. Kanchana was not the name given to me at birth, but rather was given to me as a baby by a spiritual teacher, a Hindu guru, whom my parents were following. On my birth certificate my name is Hannah, and I was named after my maternal great-grandfather. Furthermore, Hannah is a Jewish name from the Old Testament. It was important to my grandparents that I was named after a family member and given a Jewish name. Therefore, they refused to call me Kanchana, despite the fact it was the only name I knew. At some point in my childhood, my grandmother switched to Kanchi (my nickname), but my grandfather called me Hannah until his last day. It seems to me, that that may have been his way of rejecting my parents' path, and insisting on me being connected to my Jewish heritage.

Once I became a young adult, the expectations from my grandparents changed. Rather than harping on my eating habits, they continually asked when I was going to marry a rich, Jewish man. Neither of those qualities, having a lot of money or being Jewish, were ever important to me in finding a partner. I did not share those desires with my grandparents. After my grandparents passing, my mother seemed to take up the tradition of asking when I was going to find myself a rich, Jewish man. I think she says such things jokingly, but there is a part of me that feels she would not say it at all if there was not some truth in it for her. So, the pressure to

live up to some family expectation of having a specific kind of life persists. What is ironic is that my life fits none of those expectations. Thus far, I have not identified with being Jewish, nor do I date particularly wealthy men or Jewish men.

I felt inadequate in school from a young age as well. I started to read much later than most of my peers, and things that seemed to come with ease to most kids were a struggle for me. I always had to study hard, and put a lot of time and effort into my school work in order to succeed. I have a memory of a parent-teacher conference my first year of high school that was somewhat traumatic for me. My parents spoke to my biology teacher, who indicated that I was doing well enough, but could do better. I thought that I was giving my school work 100% of what I had to give. Furthermore, I was trying to adjust and transition from a creative, hands-on education at a Waldorf grade school, to a significantly larger (about 150 times) public high school. I remember my parents saying “what would it be like if you really gave 100% or 110%? Imagine what you could do”! The feeling I had in response was inadequacy. How could I give more if I was already giving my all? I am pretty sure my parents intended for that statement to be challenging, motivating, and supportive. They just wanted me to reach my full potential. However, I think I deduced from that interaction that what I had to give was not good enough, and that I would have to work harder. Somehow this mentality stuck with me, and I have always expected more of myself whether I am giving my all to a particular task or not.

Reflecting on the psychological patterns within my family cause me to wonder if I have ever really felt understood, seen, or valued by my family? I know there are parts of me that were appreciated by my grandparents, and there are parts of me that my parents love and support. However, I think there may be parts of me that my family does not understand. These are some of the parts that I have a hard time embracing within myself as well (these include but are not

limited to: my quiet self, my slow self, my privileged self, my perfectionist self, my critical self, my wild self, my American self, my white self, my African self, my Latin American self, my happy self, my smart self, my powerful self, my spiritual self). There is a desire within me to belong in general, and to belong within my family. In addition, there is an equally strong desire to be as different as possible from conventional culture and my family's culture. I have long pushed back against family and cultural norms.

It may have come from familial patterns of thought and behavior, it may have come from cultural norms and expectations, or it may be an innate component of my personality. The source is not unequivocally clear, but this pattern of thinking I have developed, that nothing I do is good enough, became ubiquitous early on in my life. Without me realizing it, it became all I know, it became comfortable, and it became part of who I am. It has manifested in my life as perfectionism, an expectation of myself to perform and produce at a level that I can never attain. Furthermore, it has manifested as a somewhat pessimistic ontology. I have long thought of myself as too serious, and of this life as too overwhelming and painful. What's more, I do not like the pessimistic part of myself, so I tend to critique the critic. Thus, I often find myself in a vicious cycle of self-degradation. Furthermore, I have to fight against my own self-criticism and expectations in everything I do, which is exhausting.

### **The benefits of self-judgment**

This mindset, that nothing I do is ever good enough, sounds like a horrible place to be. Often, it does make me miserable. Yet, there must be some way in which I benefit from this pattern of thinking, otherwise it would not have endured for the past 34 years of my life.

Perhaps I think that having nothing ever be good enough makes me humble, and humility is a quality I value in others. Yet, it does not really make me humble, it just makes me critical.

What it does do is relieve me from any responsibility or commitment. If nothing I do is ever good enough, I don't have to own it. If I am unwilling to own any of my thoughts, feelings, or actions, then I always have an escape. I do not ever have to commit to a relationship, to a career, to a place, to anything. That is how I have lived my life thus far. I have always left the door open to new, different, and hypothetically better possibilities.

I am always searching for something superior to what I have, for more, and particularly for satisfaction and fulfillment. Yet, I am continually let down when I do not find these things. I see this state of mind manifest in various parts of my life. My love of travel is something I like about myself. I find traveling eye-opening, humbling, and always a learning experience. At the same time, I tend to idealize other places and cultures. I often think I would be happier some place other than where I am, in another country or city. Yet no matter where I go, I will still be there, and I will have to be able to tolerate myself.

I am always searching for more in life, more understanding, more knowledge, more connection, etc. I search for deeper experiences, understanding, and relationships. I continually feel a need to push myself further than I have gone thus far with my studies, with my work, and beyond familiar experience. This mentality is that of a seeker, and is a never-ending internal and external search which I learned from my parents. My parents were, and to some extent still are, spiritual seekers. I learned the values, thought patterns, and behaviors of a seeker from the very beginning of my life. While the seeker's mentality can engender a thoughtful person, an intellectual person, and a worldly person, it can also have negative ramifications. What I do not think I have ever considered explicitly is that the search of a seeker is an eternal search, it never ends. It is a loop of thought and behavior that have led me, to a certain extent, to be stuck in continual dissatisfaction. I feel like I cannot ever find what is right for me, what I need, what I

want, what allows me to be fulfilled. Nor do I have clarity about what those things are that would provide joy and satisfaction.

### **Dance and fulfillment**

There are few experiences in which I have ever found complete satisfaction. The two that are the most salient to me are (a) being abroad in another country sitting by the ocean and feeling the warmth of the sun, and (b) dancing. I will elaborate on the latter as it is something I more readily have access to in my daily life.

I was shocked when I entered my first African dance class 13 years ago and felt like I had come home. As I danced over the years, class became a place where I could truly let go and be free, where I could be myself, where I came alive, felt whole, and felt sated. There, I felt like I connected to my true self, and to the essence of others. For me, nothing is wrong with the experience of an African dance class, and everything is right. Thus, dance has become a refuge for me, a place I go to rejuvenate myself, reconnect with myself, and further know myself.

One of my primary questions in this thesis is why do I value African dance? What does it provide for me, and why is it so important to me? One of the values and experiences that was most salient to me in my dancing was a sense of freedom. When I dance in this tradition, I feel free from the concerns and stresses of everyday life, I feel free from the constant chatter of my mind, I am free to enjoy my corporeal existence, I am free to be loud, to be wild, to be sexual and sensual, to celebrate life, I am free to let my spirit move me, and to merely be myself with no pretences. Furthermore, I often feel carried by an energy that is outside of me, an energy to which we are all connected, and which moves around and through all of the dancers and drummers. This form of dancing is a spiritual experience for me. It is an experience that breaks down the barriers between myself and others, that connects me to the roots of all humanity, and

to all the people that have walked this earth before me. It gives me a tangible experience of the earth and all of the natural forces at play in this world. For me, African dance provides a direct link from my essence to the universal energy that vibrates among and between all living things. It is harmony in its purest form.

This harmony and freedom that I am able to access in African dance is in direct contradiction with the debilitating and confining experience of myself I have most of the time, in which nothing I do is ever good enough. Thus, dancing provides relief and a new, positive experience of myself. Furthermore, it allows me access to spirit and parts of myself that are not weighed down by self-judgment.

Do the values and experiences I find so cunning in African dance, freedom and harmony, actually balance out opposing values I have learned throughout my life? There may be some truth to this statement. However, when I examined the values taught to me as a young person, there were many that were positive and aligned with freedom of expression and joy. Therefore, it surprises me that I have such a harsh inner critic and such a strong tendency to persecute myself.

### **Family history and the potential source of my ontology**

So, where did my values come from and what are they? To better understand the origins of what I value in life I spoke with my parents and explored their mixed cultural and religious backgrounds, and how I was influenced by their own values and experiences.

My mother grew up in a suburb of New York City where her life was full of Jewish culture. Her neighborhood was predominantly Jewish. Although not very traditional or conservative, my mother's family practiced their faith and observed the Jewish holidays. My mother's experience of Judaism was mostly cultural: the food she ate, the people she socialized with, and the values she learned from her parents all came from a Jewish foundation. What's

more, my mother was born into the post World War II era where fear of persecution was a common experience of being Jewish.

In another part of New York, the state that is, my father was raised in an observant Catholic family. He lived in a small, mountain town and as the oldest of six attended Catholic, military school. My father recalls going to mass in Latin at least once a day, and being an altar boy for many years. I do not really know how traditional my father's family was in terms of living by the terms set forth in the Catholic Church, but I think, like my mother's experience of Judaism, my father's experience of Catholicism was cultural. His friends and his community were part of his parish, and his family celebrated the Catholic holidays.

Ironically, as young adults both of my parents rejected the religious traditions in which they were raised, and embraced new spiritual endeavors. They were intrigued by many Eastern practices and consequently lived, studied, and got married in India. They went to India motivated by a guru, a spiritual guide or teacher, named Muktananda. Straying from the norm as they did required courage and curiosity, qualities they both possessed. Following "the path less traveled" is somewhat of a norm that has been set in my family through my parents' example. It seems to be a trend I tend to follow both consciously and unconsciously.

One of the primary values that my mother has, and has passed on to me, is an openness to and embracing of people who are perceived as *the other*, or outside of what is considered normal. She said that she grew up with a lot of sensitivity to the fact that she was Jewish and thus different. She was targeted and ostracized for being Jewish, and as a result cultivated a great empathy for those with similar experiences. Along with this sensitivity to those who are in some way ostracized by society, comes a strong value of justice. I think that my mom certainly passed



on to me a core value of social justice, and of caring for those who are marginalized in our American culture, as well as around the world.

I have taken this interest in the other to even more of an extreme than my mother. I tend to covet the other and find myself interested in and attracted to people, places, and things that are as far away from what I know as possible. I am not quite sure what this drive to know things different from myself is about, but it is a strong drive within me.

My dad identified one of his core values, which may come from his Catholic education, as respect for others. He said that it is critically important to him to respect all people, and every person he comes into contact with on a daily basis. This deep respect for others combined with my mother's strong sense of social justice, may be the foundation of a strong altruistic and humanistic drive within me.

My mother and father are seekers. They have been on numerous spiritual paths and paths of personal growth. I too have a very strong seeker and existentialist inside of me. This part of myself is so potent that I often cannot rest until something feels just right. I have a desire to be authentic in everything I do. Yet this need for everything to feel just right is also perfectionistic. It is related to my pattern of thinking that nothing is ever good enough.

As young adults, both of my parents rejected their inherited cultures and familial norms, and set out on their own personal paths. With their life stories as my example, I think I have learned to question authority and search for my own answers to life's mysteries. Curiosity and an adventurous spirit are also core components of being a seeker. Having parents who are world travelers may have influenced my love for going to new places, meeting new people, and experiencing new things.

Part of the seekers quest to know and understand more comes through in my academic pursuits. I am driven to always do the best I can, and expect myself to perform better than most. Perhaps some of this drive comes from my mom's Jewish heritage. Within Jewish culture, education and intellectual striving are valued. Furthermore, questioning what you have learned, and always pushing for deeper understanding and proof of your own logic is important. My peers often poke fun at the fact that I am resistant to ideas and processes that I do not fully understand or accept. I have always thought it is important to think critically and for myself. It is possible that in some cases my critical thinking is immensely useful, yet in others it holds me back from fully embracing new experiences and people. In particular, it holds me back from embracing myself and what I have to offer.

Self-reflection and personal growth are additional values that are important to my parents. My mom is a psychotherapist and, for as long as I can remember, my parents have been engaged in some practice or community in which the focus is on cultivating self-awareness and interpersonal communication skills. The focus on personal growth seems to be more of a reaction on my parents' behalf to their own parents, rather than an inherited value. It was their way of pushing back against the patterns of thinking and behavior that did not work for them within each of their own family's cultures. Both of my parents have worked hard to prioritize family and make our relationships with one another work.

In some ways, my mother embodies the stereotypical Jewish mother. She is physically attentive and warm, she is loud and boisterous, and she is the head of the family. My experience of her is of a person who lives as fully expressed and unedited. Perhaps it is a Jewish personality trait that she inherited, or perhaps it is just her personality. As a child, her outspokenness used to embarrass me, but as an adult I appreciate her frankness and ability to express herself.

Sometimes I think I am like my mother as I am emotional and direct in my communication. Other times, I feel I am the complete opposite as I need internal time to process feelings and move forward.

It seems that I have inherited many of the values my parents hold. I did not realize this until reflecting upon it with them. However, I think that our expressions of these values may manifest differently in our lives. Furthermore, the unexplained question of why do I have an innate attraction to Afro-based culture persists? My interests have long been focused on the people, culture, music, and dance of Africa and the African-diaspora (particularly in Latin-America). I am a student of West African, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, and Caribbean dance and music. I speak Spanish and Portuguese. I have traveled to many parts of Latin America and to West Africa. I am a student of and an initiate in an Afro-Brazilian spiritual tradition, Umbanda, and I am extremely interested in folkloric culture. What does this mean about me? Was I born the wrong color or in the wrong culture? To some, such questions may seem silly or immature, but for me the struggle is real. My draw to these cultures is so strong that I cannot ignore it. There is no place that I feel more myself or more vibrant than in a West-African dance class, or on the street in Brazil surrounded by the driving beat of drums and the undulating bodies of samba dancers. For me, there is something totally primal and pure, and completely satisfying in these experiences.

The real problem is that I cannot embrace all my parts and allow them to be in harmony within me. When I ask myself if all pieces fit what would I look like? My response is that I would embrace my love of Afro-based cultures and be loud and proud of my dancing and my interests. I would not shy away from my desire to travel and work internationally. Rather, I would face it head on and work hard to find a job that would allow me to do just that, and that

which I love. I would not let the criticism of others, or my own self-criticism, bring me down and penetrate my mind and my heart. I would not doubt myself. On the contrary, I would live freely expressed, as I feel when I am dancing. And I would give myself to the world unabashedly, exclaiming who I am without fear or apologies that I do not fit into a pre-defined box. Most importantly, I would shed the self-imposed prison in my mind that nothing I do is ever good enough.

### **Intuition**

An additional value that I learned from my parents is an emphasis on intuition. I have noticed that my parents often struggle when determining how to support me in important life decisions, such as attending graduate school. At times, they tend to focus on dreams, desires, and what my gut is telling me to do in a given situation. At other times, the dialogue seems to focus on logic, reason, and anticipating the future. However, when it comes down to it, intuition tends to often be the victor and deciding factor in leading my life's path.

I wonder if this focus on intuition as a primary factor in guiding my life may explain some of my connection to Afro-based culture. The idea of intuition as being a vital component of African and African-diasporic cultures is found in the philosophy of *Négritude*. The concept of *Négritude* emerged in France in the late 1920's (Diagne, 2010). It came about through the reflections of three young, black men from French colonies living and studying in Paris. They were Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léon Gontran Damas from Guiana, and Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal (Diagne, 2010, p. 1). These men identified within themselves the need for an outlet for their feelings of revolt against the dominance of French colonial culture, and racism. Through them *Négritude* became an embodiment of black pride and everything that makes black culture unique and different from white, Western culture. As Senghor himself said, *Négritude* as

a philosophy is the “sum total of the values of civilizations of the Black World” (Diagne, 2010, p. 3). Some of the values espoused within this ontological philosophy included a focus on black art and poetry, a reclaiming of heritage, the idea of a vital and unifying life force connecting all living things (*vitalism*, a philosophy developed by French intellectual Henri Bergson in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) (Lawlor & Moulard, 2011), rhythm as a pure expression of this vital force, and a claim that “emotion is Negro, as reason is Hellenic” (Diagne, 2010, p. 9). The latter statement points to the tendency of Western culture to prioritize and value reason and intellect above intuition and emotion, and for African-based cultures to value intuitive knowledge over intellectual knowledge.

In my experience thus far in the world, it is true that white cultures around the globe tend to value primarily intellectual knowledge, while black cultures tend to prioritize intuition. Thus, it makes me wonder if part of my draw to African, and African-diasporic cultures and practices is not partially due to an innate need and craving for emotional and intuitive-based experience. I find that when I am able to connect to myself, my essence, my spirit and my intuition, I start to feel much more grounded, present, capable, and alive. I begin to trust myself more.

Clearly, intellectual knowledge is of great import in this world and has its place in advancing human society. However, I think that Western, predominantly white, dominant culture tends to lose some of the richness in life by relying so heavily on scientific, brain-based knowledge. It seems to me, and as the philosopher Henri Bergson suggested, that the equal development of both intellect and intuition would most benefit us all (Diagne, 2010, p. 10).

The interesting thing is that I find those parts of myself, intuition and spirit, most accessible and activated when dancing, and even more specifically when doing African, or Afro-Latin dance. Why do I find my connection to intuition, spirit, and myself most tangible through

music and dance? Perhaps it is an innate draw, or perhaps it is because my relationship to a universal, unifying force that exists between all living things (which is how I would define the divine) was fostered at a very young age through such mediums.

I was born into, and lived in a Hindu Ashram for the first few years of my life. As a baby and a toddler I spent time every day with my parents and their community of worshippers, listening to and participating in their chanting of mantras (prayers) and playing of music as part of their practices of devotion. I did not recognize the signs until I was older, but music and dance were always a fundamental part of my personal expression. I spent hours as a child choreographing routines, and videotaping them with my friends. My mother was often singing or dancing with me. My recollection of my dad is that he was often loudly playing classic rock or reggae music in the house. I always felt a connection to spirit through reggae music. Listening to reggae, for me, is an entirely internal experience of allowing life to float by and be slowly digested as if one was bobbing on a gentle wave in the ocean. When I hear reggae, my mind instantly goes to a visual image of the crystal blue waters of the Caribbean ocean, and my body recalls a sensation of peace.

Music was always integral in my life, but I did not find myself through dance until my early 20's when I entered my first African dance class. As mentioned above, this was a coming home experience for me, and the discovery of a passion for me that has not yet faded. Through West African dance I found Afro-Latin dance and the spiritual traditions of the *Orisha* (originally West African deities who embody the forces of nature and guide the lives of their believers). The traditions of the Orisha are particularly strong within African communities in Latin America, and include such religions as Candomble in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, Vodoun in Haiti, etc. When I found these traditions, I was immediately drawn to their central practice of

experiencing the divine and paying homage to spiritual guides through dance and music. In these traditions, music, dance, and spirit are inextricably linked. One cannot exist without the other. Subsequently, I continued on to write my undergraduate thesis on Cuban Santería, and became an initiate into an Afro-Brazilian spiritual tradition called Umbanda, which is related to Candomblé.

Returning to the question of why do I find my connection to intuition, spirit, and myself most tangible through music and dance? I am not sure if it is simply beyond reason and is just that my essential self is called forward through the basic human experiences of movement and rhythm. Or, maybe it is a cumulative experience of being exposed to, and always returning to, the ecstasy I find in dance and music.

### **Integration or disintegration**

My goal in this thesis and in the present moment is to find a way to integrate the various parts of myself that have not seemed to fit together thus far. I do not think I have yet accomplished this, but I may be one step closer by having spent time in reflection and self discovery. I see now that I have not been able to embrace any parts of myself, both those I have inherited and those to which I am attracted. It would seem important in order for self-acceptance to occur that I would need to reconcile my whiteness, my Americanness, and my privilege. In addition, I should be open to those fundamental parts of me that love African, Afro-Latin, and African American culture, people, languages, dance, and music. Perhaps the next step in moving towards a cohesive self is breaking down the concept I have fully embodied that nothing I do is ever good enough. If I could begin to chip away at the power this psychological pattern has over me, I may be able to create internal space for myself to open up to the possibilities of who I am.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

### **Do my findings answer my research question?**

The thesis question for this research project was: how do I navigate an internal world of multi-culturalism, and integrate disparate parts of myself, in order to work with diversity and cross-cultural issues in the world through dance/movement therapy? I wanted to know why, thus far in my life, I have been unable to embrace all of who I am. I have felt scattered and my sense of self seemed intangible. Feeling uncomfortable in myself and unsure of how to bring together my seemingly incongruent parts, I felt that I was not able to be fully present in my work as a dance/movement therapist and counselor. Thus, I embarked on an introspective journey to try and better understand myself through autoethnography.

It is somewhat challenging to identify whether or not during this thesis process I found specific answers to my question of why I have not been able to form a cohesive identity. What I did discover were new and interesting things about myself I had not explicitly acknowledged or been aware of before. Below is a reflection of what I have learned.

What I found in this self-reflective process was a deeper connection to my ancestry and my family. I found that I truly am a product of my parents' values and the experiences I had growing up in my particular family nucleus. Through a better understanding of how I am both similar and different from my parents I can see the profound connection between us. By realizing that I was both unable to embrace the cultures from which I come as well as the cultures to which I am drawn, I think I opened a door in myself that allows me to be more related to my family. I have begun to open up to the possibility of integrating those parts I always pushed away (such as being American, white, upper-middle class, privileged, educated, and of Catholic and Jewish descent). Yet, I am still unsure of how to truly engender this integration.



In the search for a reason about why I have been unable to embrace my various parts, I identified experiences that thus far in my life have been truly transformational. These experiences included moments of loss and grief, moments of heightened states of awareness through connection to spirit, moments of joy and ease when in relationship to the natural world, moments of embracing the unknown through such things as international travel, and moments of freedom when fully engaged in dance. The thread between these transformational experiences for me was that they were all highly emotional, whether the emotion was joy, pain, or a rush from facing the unknown. By looking at these significant life events, I could see themes: that I am a junkie for transcendent experience (spiritual experience or alternate states of consciousness), that I am deeply committed to making meaning of life, and that being in relationship with people, with nature, and with my body is essential for me. By making explicit what was transformational for me and what themes I have carried with me in my life thus far, I learned more about what I value and live for.

I realized that my struggles and my orientation towards a multi-cultural experience of the world may actually be gifts in my life. Although it has been difficult for me thus far to integrate my many parts, perhaps my diverse experiences can also be seen as positive. I have been unbelievably lucky to have traveled throughout the world, to have found such an intense passion in African dance, to have had profound experiences of spiritual transformation, to have had such a supportive family, and to be educated to the level where I am afforded the freedom to contemplate such things. From the perspective I have been awarded by my accumulative experiences thus far in life, I can see that perhaps I have a lot to offer. I know my joy lies in dancing through the streets in Brazil, in feeling the heat of the sun on my back, the softness of the sand between my fingers and toes, and the caress of the waves when by the ocean. I know

that my joy lies in moving passionately and ecstatically in dance class, feeling the pulse of the beating drums resonate throughout my body, and in the sisterhood I have found in my dance community. I know that for me dancing is freedom and harmony. For me, it is a pure, unedited expression of my essence and my joy.

I hope that knowing my own joy and knowing that it lies in many cross-cultural experiences will help me in being particularly adept at supporting others in finding their hearts' desires. Our world is now globally accessible, and navigating multi-cultural relationships, whether it be with others or within one's self, can be both exciting and challenging. I hope that my own experience of navigating the complexities of a multi-cultural self, will aid me in supporting others who are searching to understand themselves and their own experience of multiculturalism and identity formation. I hope that this internal journey of self-reflection and self-acceptance will help me be a more stable, accepting, authentic, and engaged clinician.

I find part of my joy in life by trusting my intuition and having the courage to walk down a path that appears to be leading nowhere. For many years, I could not understand my random interests and desires, and often felt lost. I was not the typical, American woman who wanted to follow a specific career path, find a husband, buy a house, and have a family. Rather, I found myself wandering the streets of Cuba, dropping in on ceremonies of Santería and Candomblé, and following the call of the drum across continents. Whether consciously or not, I followed the call of my intuitive desires and found myself deeply connected to the culture of African dance. During the process of writing this thesis, I searched for further understanding of what it is that I value so much in African dance, and realized that it may be intuition itself that connects me so profoundly to Afro-based cultures. I completely align with a central tenant of the philosophy of Négritude that intuition and emotional knowledge are essential to life and alive in black

communities. Perhaps this connection to intuition is part of my intense draw to cultures from Africa and the African diaspora.

Through all of the introspective work I did, and the painful birthing process of this thesis, another profound thing that came to light was a pervasive and damaging thought pattern I have developed, which is that nothing I do is ever good enough. Shining the light on this detrimental pattern of thought helped me realize how ubiquitous it is in my life, and also gave me the chance to address it, begin to make change, and hopefully strip it of some of its power. I now know that one way I combat the power this pattern of thought has over me is by dancing. I see that dancing is invaluable for me and completely vital.

By dissecting all of my different parts, my values, my drives, my joy, and my pain I think I now have a better picture of the complex dialogue that is continually taking place inside of me. I am not sure that I have answered my thesis question about how to navigate an internal world of multi-culturalism, but I think that at least now I know what it is that I am attempting to navigate through. I do not know how to integrate all of my seemingly disparate parts, but I think I see more of a connection between them and feel more open to all of them. Perhaps some of the steps on the journey towards integration include awareness of one's self and openness to one's self. Both of these qualities I have begun to unfold in this process. Will this introspective investigation help make me a better dance/movement therapist and counselor? I cannot say for sure, but I would like to believe that knowing myself better will help me be more authentically available to others and better equipped to support others in being open to themselves.

### **Towards integration: exploring and choreographing movement**

In an effort to encapsulate my experience during this thesis process, I spent time both in a movement exploration, as well as creating a short piece of choreography, reflecting upon the

entire project. First, I filmed the movement exploration, and then came back a couple weeks later and filmed the choreography. All of the footage will be submitted along with my written thesis. The movement exploration is a little over half an hour, and the choreography is five minutes. My observations and analysis of both the choreography and the exploration are below. In this section, I will use some of the concepts and terms developed by Rudolf Laban to explain my interpretation of the movement. Laban was a movement analyst, working in Europe in the early 1900s (Moore, 2009b). He spent many years trying to understand human movement, and between the years of 1919 and 1958 established a theoretical platform, as well as a notation system, to help people observe, document, and discuss movement (Moore, 2009b).

I will begin the discussion below with my observations of and feelings about the movement exploration. The primary things that jumped out at me in the movement exploration were a connection to the floor, a split between my head and body that occurred because I covered my head with my scarf, and the absence of effortful movement, including engaging in passive use of my weight.

After reviewing these key aspects of my movement during the open-ended exploration, I will move on to examine the choreography. The use of my scarf in the movement exploration was significant to me, and so I adopted that into the choreography. In the choreography, like in the movement exploration, it was important to me to begin and end with my body in contact with the floor. The choreography strayed from the movement exploration when I shifted from passive engagement in movement and my weight to active engagement. In the choreography, I extensively used my affinity for the *motion factor* of weight, and its *fighting quality* of *increasing pressure* (both the concepts of motion factors in movement, as well as how they present on a continuum from fighting to indulging, will be explained below). Thus, I think

engaging in movement that is comfortable to me within the choreography made me feel a little more like myself.

**Movement exploration.** During the movement exploration, and at the beginning of the piece of choreography, I spent a lot of time on the floor. For me, having my body in contact with the floor is soothing and grounding. Somehow the floor offers a place of rest and peace. While on the floor, I noticed that I spent more time face down than on my back. I recall feeling too vulnerable when facing up and having my body open to the world. I was not able to tolerate the supine position until the end of my exploration. In addition, I had a desire to keep my head in contact with the floor for much of the time. Even when I moved my lower body into action, my desire to stay connected to the floor through my head was strong. Perhaps this was indicative of a fear of facing the world, or maybe it was a desire to stay internally oriented.

Early on in the movement sequence, I covered my head with my scarf. I spent most of the time with my head covered, and felt like I did not want to take off the scarf. Covering my head helped me go and stay internally focused, and took away my sight. Even though I could see a bit through my scarf, I had my eyes closed most of the time. I think I was more interested in preventing others from seeing me than being able to see out myself. Covering my head gave me the illusion of being invisible. I felt like it took the attention off of me, and supported me in shifting my awareness from my mind to my body. Since I was hiding my face behind my scarf, could it mean that I did not want to be seen? This begs the question by whom did I not want to be seen: by myself, by others, or both? Furthermore, I do not know from what I was hiding, or what it was that I was hiding from others.

The scarf certainly made me feel hidden from the outside world. However, upon viewing the video of the movement exploration, I also noticed that the scarf clearly made a split between

my head and my body. The movement of my head sometimes seemed independent of the rest of my body. I wonder if with the scarf I was unconsciously disconnecting my head (including my mind and my intellect) from my body (my corporeal experience and the house of my intuition). I have noticed in my life that I can easily get wrapped up in one and forget about the other. Perhaps some of my internal work of integrating my many parts into a more cohesive self, could be aided by an external, corporeal integration of my head and my body. Maybe I need to work on allowing more of a free flow of energy between my head and my body. I would not be surprised if this physical integration helps me integrate my different senses of knowing (thinking and intuiting) in my clinical work as well.

There is something in this split between my head and my body that has to do with trust. I want to trust my body, and my intuitive self, but I do not. I hesitate and second guess myself. Also, I get anxious and self-conscious when I do not feel like I have enough intellectual knowledge to address a given situation. For example, when working with patients in the hospital I often times feel inadequately trained, educated, or experienced to handle a given situation. Even though I know deep down that I am perfectly capable of helping, I worry that I am not. I do not trust myself, and I do not know how to alter that belief.

When I watched the video of my movement exploration, I also noticed that the scarf looked like it could be a *transitional object* (transitional objects are actual things, such as a blanket or a teddy bear, that children often use to provide comfort and security when first learning to separate from their primary caregiver) (St. Clair & Wigren, 2004). The scarf hid me from the external world and provided comfort. Maybe it was functioning as a bridge between me and the rest of the world, or maybe it was a barrier. Perhaps I had it there to comfort me when feelings arose. There were two moments during the movement exploration when I cried for a

little while. The tears seemed to be tears of grief. That grief may have been related to loneliness, or to feelings about being invisible and unknown. However, I think the most potent part of that grief was related to my inability to accept and love myself.

When observing myself in the video, I noticed a lot of non-volitional movement and use of passive weight. What I mean is that I spent a lot of time wandering in the space without any apparent direction or intention. Furthermore, I spent a lot of time just giving into the natural forces of gravity rather than actively engaging my weight. My first thought when reflecting upon this tendency to move without intention or effort, was that I was being complacent. This is a possible explanation for my floppy, happenstance movement. However, what resonated with me even more was a desire to give up control. Grounding myself through my weight is one of the best ways for me to stay centered and present in life. Therefore, by not intentionally engaging my weight I was able to check out of my mind and kind of floated off into a disembodied state. It seems that my desire to give up control is connected to my struggle to form a cohesive identity. This is due to the fact that there is a part of me that sincerely wants to understand my disjointed self and belief systems, yet there is another part of me that just wants to throw my hands up, surrender, and not care at all about the outcome. I do not want to always have to be in control.

In summary, the three things that were most salient for me in the movement exploration were: finding home and grounding through a connection to the floor, the visual split between my head and my body through my scarf, and lack of engagement in my movement in general and in particular with my weight. The floor allowed me to be in an internal, safe place where I could block out the world and just be in myself. My use of the scarf seemed to be connected to a lack of trust I have in myself. It seemed to have separated an internal experience of safety and non-judgment, from an external experience of myself that includes a belief that nothing I do is good

enough. Lastly, my passive use of movement and my weight highlighted a rather abrupt transition from being unsure of myself to letting go of control all together. It seemed to be indicative of a desire to give up trying to be responsible, independent, and understanding, and just be.

**Choreography.** I believe it is necessary to begin this section with a brief explanation of some of Rudolf Laban's concepts about understanding human movement. Below I will merely skim the surface of Laban's theory and taxonomy in order to be able to talk about a few of his concepts in my subsequent analysis. I hope his ideas are clear enough for the reader to be able to understand my thoughts about the movement choreography created for this discussion chapter.

Within the analytical language Laban developed is a concept he called *effort* (Moore, 2009b). The effort of movement is the intention that a person puts into her movement. Effort helps articulate how a person intends to move. Within the category of effort, Laban identified four motion factors that help explain the inner intent of movement. These four motion factors include: *flow*, or the ever-changing degree of control that a person needs for a movement task; *weight*, which can be explained as the right amount of force exerted for a movement task; *time*, which articulates the speed of motion whether slow and luxurious or rapid and hurried; and *space*, or where one intends to go when moving (Moore, 2009b). Furthermore, within each motion factor (flow, weight, time, and space) Laban noted that people move along a continuum. He used the following language to articulate the extremes of each continuum: on one end were the fighting qualities, while on the other end were the indulging qualities (Moore, 2009b). For example, within the motion factor of weight, one can engage her weight by increasing pressure in such an activity as hammering a nail into the wall. This would be the fighting quality of weight, increasing pressure. The indulging quality of weight is decreasing pressure. One may see



someone engage in this type of movement when handling something fragile, such as a glass or an egg.

Laban attempted to explain the complexity of volitional human movement, or effort, by combining two different motion factors into what he termed *states*, and three different motion factors into what he termed *drives* (Moore, 2009b). Laban theorized that people engage habitually, and spend most of their time, in states. What's more, we tend to have preferences for certain kinds of movement or certain states. For instance, my preferred state is *rhythm state*. This state combines the motion factors of weight and time. To further specify my preference, I enjoy the fighting quality of weight, increasing pressure, and the indulging quality of time, decelerating. This is like my comfort zone, and the type of movement I may return to in order to recuperate from any other form of exertion. The state of rhythm can be seen in such common movements as tapping your toes to music.

According to Laban, drives are combinations of three motion factors. Drives describe “Movement moods...” that “are intensely colored and demanding to perform both physically and psychologically” (Moore, 2009a, p. 161). Each of the four drives demands concerted effort and displays dynamic movement. Here I will mention only the *passion drive* because it is the drive I prefer and discuss below. The passion drive combines the effort factors of flow, weight, and time, and leaves out the effort factor of space. This type of movement is highly emotive and can include movement that is “blind with rage, intoxicated with joy, or overcome with grief” (Moore, 2009a, p. 162). One example of passion drive is when two tango dancers are dancing and totally absorbed in the emotional experience of their art form.

Now I will redirect the discussion from Laban and back to my thoughts on the choreography I created. Like the movement exploration, I wanted to begin the choreography in

contact with the floor. Also, I wanted my head covered to display the split I identified between my head and my body (which represented a split between my cognitive self and feeling self). What I noticed in the choreography that I did not see so readily in the movement exploration, was my tendency to engage in movement that is preferential for me, such as rhythm state. Within that state I enjoy the fighting quality of increasing pressure and the indulging quality of decelerating. I found myself employing these qualities in various movements in the choreography which felt comfortable.

I used a lot of slow time in the choreography, taking about two minutes to even get up off the floor. When I moved onto my feet I noticed I began to speed up my movement a bit, and that felt unnatural. I had to check myself and fall back in line with what felt good. I felt more aligned with myself when I sank into my weight in my lower body, reached out into the sagittal plane with voluminous, undulating movements, and allowed each movement to progress all the way through my torso and arms until it slowed down and was complete. Then I accessed my quick time to initiate another movement and allow it to slow down again. These movements felt familiar and soothing as they are reminiscent of African dance.

In addition to his work on effort and volitional movement, Laban wrote about the human body and its relationship to the space around it. He noted that we function within three cardinal planes (Moore, 2009b). The three planes are: the vertical plane, which orients our body vertically and horizontally, and can be visualized as a door; the horizontal plane, which has width and depth and can be imagined as a table encircling our body; and the sagittal plane, which surrounds us from front to back and includes a vertical dimension (Moore, 2009b). The sagittal plane can be referred to as the wheel plane. We move forwards and backwards as well as up and down in the sagittal plane, such as when doing a somersault. We move up and down and side to side in

the vertical plane, like when doing a cartwheel. Lastly, we move forwards and backwards and side to side when cycling through the horizontal plane, like when doing a flying barrel turn. (Moore, 2009a).

When making meaning out of movement, Laban hypothesized that there are certain affinities between specific directions in space (forward and back, up and down, and side to side) and certain effort qualities (flow, time, weight, and space) (Moore, 2009a). In the choreography, I noticed I spent quite a bit of time reaching into the sagittal plane. Laban associated moving forward in the sagittal plane with slow movements intended toward taking action, and moving backwards with quick movements retreating from something coming towards a person (Moore, 2009). At times, I was reaching forward into the sagittal plane and bringing that energy back into my back space. It felt like I was feeding my lack of a connection to my history and ancestors (in the space behind me) with something from the future (in the space in front of me). Another moment in which I was cycling in the sagittal plane was when I was on my knees and my upper body moved forward to connect with the floor and back up into the vertical dimension. This movement almost felt like a prostration. It was as if I was prostrating to the world and the unknown that always lies ahead. Perhaps I was surrendering to what is now, as well as what will be.

It was after my engagement in the African dance-like movement in rhythm state that I was able to stop and be in the vertical dimension and plane. Again to ground myself, I sank down into my weight in my lower body, and reached up to the upper corners of the vertical plane with my arms and hands. This was a very grounding and empowering stance for me. Within the field of dance/movement therapy and counseling, clinicians have surmised that movement in the vertical dimension and plane can be associated with a sense of self. Thus, I will assert here that

my transition into a solid form in the vertical plane was indicative of a level of comfort being in myself.

It was from that grounded place of being connected to myself that I removed my scarf from my head. I noticed that I did so facing away from the camera. Perhaps I felt enough strength to remove the scarf and allow myself to be seen, but not enough strength to do it without a little bit of the protection of anonymity by facing away. I was again moving slowly towards the prospect of revealing myself by allowing others to see my face.

When I did turn around to face the camera, without the scarf over my head, there was an unexpected moment when I felt grounded and free to move. I think at this time I engaged in my preferred drive, the passion drive. At this moment, I was actively using the indulging quality of free flow, the fighting quality of increasing pressure, and vacillating between the fighting quality of acceleration and indulging quality of deceleration. The passion drive is free of an attention to space and one's orientation in space. Furthermore, dance/movement therapists and counselors have associated one's attention to space with the act of thinking. So, when removing my attention to space, I also removed my thinking mind. Thus, allowing myself to be free to follow my body and my intuition.

After moving my upper body in a big circle through the horizontal plane, and opening myself up to the world of relationship, I was able to stand still for a moment in the vertical dimension and let it all sink in. I saw myself as having a moment of integration when standing there and lightly touching my body with my hands and fingers. Finally, I felt like I wanted to end by reconnecting with the floor, the earth, and the source of life. Thus, I concluded the choreography by lying back down on the floor in the fetal position and returning to the place where I had begun.

The primary thing that distinguished the choreography from the movement exploration was a sense of some integration. I think in the choreography I was able to find movement that was comfortable for me and natural for me. This included movements that were similar to movements in African dance, as well as active participation in my preferred state of rhythm. This was grounding for me. Furthermore, I explored movements in all three of the planes: moving into action in the sagittal, opening to others through the horizontal, and standing solid in myself in the vertical. Finally, I was able to trust myself for a moment during the choreography and move into a more invested sequence of movements when I engaged in the passion drive. It was for that brief period of time, while in the passion drive, that I felt as though I trusted myself. I was able to experience for a fleeting moment that perhaps, sometimes I am enough.

#### **A bridge between this thesis and existing research**

The link between this thesis and other existing autoethnographies is that they are all unique and highly personal. They are each different even if discussing the same topic, such as the topic here of identity development. Yet they are all alike as they include the stories of human beings who are struggling to reconcile experiences and feelings on the path towards loving and embracing one's self. More often than not, people choose to write an autoethnography to better understand an experience, a part of their life, or a part of themselves with which they struggle. It is the commonality of struggle, and the desire to understand that struggle, that binds autoethnographers together. What's more, most autoethnographers write their stories with the hope that it will touch another human being and assist that person in discovering something new about herself.

If I were to do this research project again, I would like to begin with a better understanding of what autoethnography is and how various people practice it. I do not feel like I

really understood autoethnography as a method until I had produced all of my data, written my results chapter, and then went back to read more about autoethnography and write the literature review. Part of the challenge in grasping autoethnography as a method, is that it is a flexible approach to research that can take many forms. If I could have had more clarity on how I wanted to pursue this project, in a step by step format, that would have been preferable. However, the natural, nonlinear way in which this thesis project unfolded was both part of the challenge and part of the beauty of it. For the majority of the two and a half years during which I was working on this project, I had no idea what I was going to find.

If I had had a better understanding of autoethnography at the commencement of the project, I would have liked to have written this paper in more engaging narrative prose. Many autoethnographers write by using a dialogue between characters in their stories, and I find this makes for a more interesting read. It allows the players to come alive and draws the reader in. I worry that this thesis may be too conceptually written to engage readers.

Lastly, if I were to start this project anew, I would lower my expectations of myself. I began with the expectation of finding life-altering, new information about myself, and with the expectation of being able to find resolution with the presenting problem. These high expectations held me back for a long time from even being able to see what I had learned in the process of reflective writing. I spent two years feeling like I was getting nowhere and learning nothing. It was not until the last couple months, two and a half years after I began, that I was able to see that I had learned a lot, as well as be comfortable with what I have not yet accomplished. I do not have ways to fix my inability to accept all of my seemingly disparate parts and create a cohesive identity. However, I do have a much deeper understanding of who I am, where I come from, why

each of those parts are important to me, and how they could potentially come together to make a whole.

### **In summary**

At the commencement of this project, I set out to reconcile and integrate what seemed like disparate parts of myself. I wanted to do so in order to be both more balanced as an individual and more authentic as a dance/movement therapist and counselor. Thus, I began this investigation with the thesis question: how do I navigate an internal world of multi-culturalism, and integrate disparate parts of myself, in order to work with diversity and cross-cultural issues in the world through dance/movement therapy?

The result of this journey is that I am closer to where I would like to be. I have not found total acceptance for all of my parts, yet I have found some more tolerance for them. I have struggled to feel that my story is worth telling, and have made some progress as I am offering it here to my readers. I have begun to integrate my many parts through all of the self-reflective writing and dialoguing in which I have participated for this project. What's more, I have begun to integrate my parts by transferring the experience from intellectual to felt through movement.

I hope that all of this effort will assist me in being a more balanced individual, as well as a more understanding dance/movement therapist and counselor. I hope that I will be able to allow for more of a free flow of energy between my mind and my body so that I can trust my intuitive self to be present and active in my clinical work. I hope that if I can find trust in who I am and a willingness to embrace my authentic self, that I can help others to do the same. Finally, I have confirmed for myself the importance of dance, particularly dance from Africa and the African diaspora, in my life. I will never lose sight of its potency for me, and will always foster the passion I have for it.

I hope the field of dance/movement therapy and counseling will accept this masters' thesis as one perspective on the struggle of identity development. The world in which we live is diverse in many ways. In particular, the culture of the United States is complex, vast, and different from each person's perspective. I hope that as providers in a helping profession we, dance/movement therapists and counselors, can recognize the difficulty of each person in her struggle to find her place in such a diverse and constantly-changing world. I think that we need to be open to evolving definitions of culture, identity, and self, and support each person in finding the definition that makes her feel authentic and empowered. I hope that we can do this for ourselves, for each other, and for our clients alike.

I think engagement in autoethnographic research is immensely valuable. Every person has her own story to tell and no two stories are alike. I would be very interested to know why all of the women I dance closely with value African dance. Why is it important to them and what does it provide for them in their lives? I would like to know how African dance affects their own sense of identity. I would like to know how others identify themselves, why, and if they feel comfortable in their own skin. I would like to know why dance is important to the lives of so many dance/movement therapists and counselors. What are their stories with dance, and how has it impacted their lives? I would like to know the stories of how and why each dance/movement therapist and counselor became a dance/movement therapist and counselor. What drew them to mental health, and what drew them to embrace an expressive approach to working with mental health issues? I would like to know what the important experiences are in their lives that have made them to be who they are today. Some day, I would like to support clients in doing autoethnographic research and/or reflection on their own lives. What are their stories that need to be told and how would they like to tell them?



Furthermore, I think more autoethnographic work using creative modalities of expression such as dance, performance, drama, music, poetry, etc. should be encouraged. Embodying one's process and findings provides a level of integration unattainable only through cognitive reflection. Exactly how embodying an experience provides a different sense of integration I cannot articulate, but I know from experience that I feel a different sort of resonance with material when I embody it both physically and mentally. The power of the body is unequivocal in my view.

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## **Appendix A: Definition of Terms**

### **Autoethnography**

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2001, p. 273).

### **Dance/movement therapy**

Dance/movement therapy is a field of study and a professional, clinical, psychotherapeutic practice. The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) defined dance/movement therapy as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual” (ADTA, 2009). The ADTA wrote that this definition is based on the “the empirically supported premise that the body, mind and spirit are interconnected” (2009).

### **Expressive Therapist**

Expressive therapists are therapists that use various alternative, creative modalities within the psychotherapeutic process. Included in the umbrella term expressive therapist, are art therapists, dance/movement therapists, music therapists, drama therapists, or those who use various modalities at the same time. According to Levine and Levine (1999), expressive arts therapy “is grounded not in the particular techniques or media but in the capacity of the arts to respond to human suffering” (p. 11). These authors continued to write that expressive arts therapists “must therefore be prepared to work with sound, image, movement, enactment and text

as they are required in the encounter with the lived situation of the client” (Levine & Levine, 1999, p. 11).